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TALES OF GHOSTS AND HAUNTED HOUSES



THE WORLD'S WORK (1913) LTD
London Kingswood

CONTENTS

THE CURATOR CHATS <i>Strange stories from a Provincial Museum.</i>	J. ENNARKE	3
REVANOFF'S FANTASIA <i>The house haunted by a ghostly melody.</i>	HENRY RAWLE	36
THE MAN TIGER <i>What O'Hara and Aloysius found at the end of the trail.</i>	JUBA KENNERLEY	41
THE CORPSE SAT UP <i>Nervous manifestations after death.</i>	G. D. SHELTON	52
VIGILANCE AT NIGHT <i>The ghost car and the traffic census.</i>	W. M. COLE	58
VERGE OF THE TWO WORLDS <i>The ghoulish presence at the seance.</i>	ROLAND ARMITAGE	61
LONG GREY FIELDS <i>The wanderings of a mind deranged.</i>	PAUL RORKE	72
"EXCEPT HE BE SENT FOR. . ." <i>"How dreadful it would be . . . to find a devil waiting."</i>	A. J. BULL	76
THE FLUTE <i>The Hamadryad and the death of Ram Das.</i>	ROGER GRAHAM	85
THE WOMAN WITH THE SCYTHE <i>The nightmare that came true.</i>	ROBERT E. NICOLSON	90

TALES OF GHOSTS AND HAUNTED HOUSES

Master Thriller Series No. 32

The Curator Chats

Strange Stories from a Provincial Museum

By J. ENNARKE

If, at Speenbury, we are proud of our Museum—and I can assure you that we are—we are even more proud of its Curator. And with reason. A short study of any comprehensive work of reference will at once disclose the fact that his attainments are many, and are as much appreciated abroad as they are at home.

Though our town has very little to commend it to the casual visitor, seeking only the delights of the popular resort, it is situated in a corner of Wessex rich, even for that fortunate district, in archaeological remains. In early days, Neolithic Man, Briton, Roman, Saxon and Norman descended on it, built their dwellings, lived their lives, and passed into the limbo of history, while later came Cavalier and Roundhead, bringing with them the terror and romance of internecine war. They too, abode their little hour, and went their way, leaving our fields and woodlands, our rivers and long rolling Downs to the peace of rural England.

But each invader left behind him traces of his sojourn—a flint axe-

head, tessellated pavement, morion or sword which the skilful seeker may find. Nor, for that matter, need he be particularly skilful. Time and again, relics of all kinds have been literally unearthed by accident, many, alas! to fall into unappreciative hands. But not if our Curator gets to hear of them! At the first suggestion of any find, no matter how insignificant it may appear to the layman, he is on it like a knife, and carries it away to his lair in the Museum, where he finds out as much about it as its original maker ever knew—possibly rather more.

For the Curator is no mere hap-hazard collector, or even trained observer. Behind his cautious, precise, scientific exactness lies a vast appreciation of the unusual. Nothing pleases him more than to find that some specimen, ordinary enough in itself, perhaps, has a story behind it.

I don't mean the story that every museum piece must of necessity possess, but rather a story of the bizarre, occult, or, if you will, ghostly, which so often is associated with the

tangible evidence of our very mixed history. If our Curator can "smell out" any suspicion of myth or legend, authentic history, or hazy local belief, linked up with any of his beloved specimens, then his cup of joy is full.

Profound as is his knowledge of the beaten paths of archaeology, I honestly believe that his insight into that borderland that lies between fact and fantasy is even deeper. Not that he will talk about it. Very few of his friends and none of his acquaintances even suspect this side of him, but knowing my own delight in spooks, and trusting to my discretion, he has passed on to me some of his stories.

I am an ordinary medicine man, by the way—a common or garden G.P. I like to think that my strong point is the treatment of the manifold ailments of children, but that may be only self-deception. However this may be, it was by reason of this belief of mine that I got to know the Curator.

His only child, aged about seven and a great pal of mine, went down with broncho-pneumonia—and it was touch and go with him. But, *laus Deo*, one evening, when his father and I both feared the worst, Azrael, the dark angel of death, wrapped his purple robe around him and departed, leaving the child with us. Since then, the Curator and I have been the greatest of friends, a state of affairs I value above rubies.

The practical side of this is that the Curator's office at the Museum is as much mine as his. There, in that little room which combines all the delights of study, work-room, laboratory, stone-mason's yard and, occasionally, zoo, I find rest, physical and intellectual, from the hurried life and manifold anxieties of the physician.

You get to it by climbing a short spiral staircase at the end of the main hall of the Museum. You thread your way through the cases, pausing if you are polite, to raise your hat to the skeleton of the Stone Age lady who reposes, we trust peacefully, among the

celts and scrapers in the large case on the right, dodge round the stuffed and mounted badgers, and clatter up the iron steps in the corner.

If you have the entrée, you will be hailed joyfully by the Curator, supplied with cigarettes and told to make yourself comfortable. This you will do by clearing away a heterogeneous collection of flints, towe, small bones and similar scientific debris from the only arm-chair, and wait. The Curator, probably, will be engaged in some intricate mystery of his craft, and will seem to ignore you. But not for long. With a sigh of satisfaction he will push his work to one side, wipe his hands down the front of his khaki dust-coat, light a cigarette, and beam at you.

Such is the general atmosphere of the surroundings in which these stories were told to me, that mixed air of reality and romance, hard practical fact and glowing theory, bright light and violet haze which is the true aura of all museums.

CHAPTER I

THE PLAQUE



when it is possible to forget for a little

"Did I ever show you this?" asked the Curator, one afternoon. We had foregathered after tea, at that delightful hour which sees the visiting-list completed and the hour of evening surgery still in the future

while that mankind is heir to many ills, and one can give one's mind to contemplation of things beyond the limits of signs and symptoms—if indeed there is a limit to such things.

He put into my hand a clay tablet, measuring about ten by six inches. It was flat, with no marks of any kind on the surface, except the crude outline of a human hand. The two middle fingers were bent down towards the palm, with the thumb overlapping them, leaving the index and little finger extended. I examined it carefully, and some dim recollection stirred in my mind.

"Isn't it some Mediterranean symbol, a kind of amulet against the evil eye?" I asked tentatively.

"Right in one," he answered. "It came from a Viking burial mound, you know, in Wessex."

"Quite so!" I answered. "Now tell me where the catch is, how I have made a fool of myself, and I will join in the hearty laughter."

"No," he said. "There isn't any catch, though at first sight, facts don't quite fit in, do they? I mean, the geography is rather various, as it were. I'll tell you about it. Do you remember old James Corven, the professor of archaeology at Cambrox?"

"Vaguely," I answered. "Didn't he have some sort of accident, a year or so back?"

"That's the *fons et origo* of the story," he replied, lighting another cigarette. "For the past few years, old Jimmie Corven has been steadily adding to his reputation by increasing our knowledge of our own ancestors. They are not very remote ones, only about a thousand years or so back, which is but as yesterday to the antiquary.

"Indeed, we know a good deal about them; their lives and loves, hates and wars have been handed down to us with considerable accuracy. We know quite a lot about their domestic life, their wars by land and sea, and some of their glorious sagas are still with us. What is more, we know something

about their religious beliefs, the codes that governed them, what they did during their lifetime, and what they expected after death.

"All this, of course, is no new knowledge—it has been accumulating for many years, partly through the skill of those who can interpret the old runes, and partly from direct observation and naturally, so far as the latter is concerned it must be of relics left to us, that are unearthed from time to time, either by accident or by careful excavation.

"You may know—many people do—that wherever possible, the dead Viking liked to be put on his great ship, with his dead horse and hound and much of his gear and treasure, set on fire and pushed out to sea. Very appropriate and fitting, but Vikings didn't all die near the sea, at least those who settled in England didn't, so some other method was adopted.

"Frequently, they were laid in state with their belongings around them, and great piles of earth were heaped round them. Often these mounds were very large, and have remained to this day, guarding their occupants until the prying pick of the excavator brings them to light.

"This is where James was in his element. It was really the fieldwork of archaeology that appealed to him, and he was amazingly good at it. He had the true flair of the treasure-hunter—of course I use the word 'treasure' in a museum sense. He seemed to be able to detect the barrows (as these burial mounds are called) that contained worth-while specimens, and his knowledge of their contents was encyclopaedic. He lived not far from here, and I knew him well.

"One day, he came into the Museum in a state of high excitement. He said he was convinced that a small coppice close to Graychalk Farm had a barrow within it. It seems that the old fellow had recently heard from a colleague in Norway who had unearthed some

record in Upsala which hinted at an unusual barrow in this part of the country.

"The burial mound itself, he told me, was, for some reason, surrounded by a stone wall, that is to say, it stood in an enclosure of some kind, a most unusual state of affairs. Now, the coppice at Graychalk stands on the open Downs, as so many of our Wessex coppices do, but there was certainly no stone wall round it. I knew the place well—at most, one could detect a kind of ridge in the turf, but such ridges are not uncommon on the Downs, and I do not know if anyone had ever paid any attention to it.

"I do know that the coppice itself showed no obvious sign of any mound, all of which I pointed out to him at length. But it didn't damp his ardour a bit. If he could get permission to dig, would I help him?

"Of course I said I would. Provided a curator is about the place for a reasonable time each day, his Committee don't, as a rule, discourage him from scientific wanderings abroad. Rather the reverse, in fact. Anyhow, a voyage of investigation could do no harm, so I agreed to accompany him.

"We chose the middle of the week for our spying out of the land, because we wanted to be alone if possible. In these days of cars, bikes, hikers, scouts and other open air lovers, the countryside tends to be overcrowded at the week-end. So on a Wednesday, Jimmie shamefully crammed my small Austin with poles such as surveyors use, tape-measures, and a rather ingenious little pick and shovel affair, a kind of super entrenching tool.

"'Not,' he explained, 'that we are going to do any serious digging.' I breathed again. 'This small kit is just to help us with a few preliminary investigations.'

"We trundled along, Jimmie's impedimenta giving the car a distinctly raffish appearance, until we came to the coppice, where we unloaded our stores

and had a general look round.

"'We'll test the wall story first,' suggested James. 'If that proves to be founded on fact, we can examine the site of the mound later. There's no point in doing unnecessary digging.'

"I heartily agreed with this unexpected sign of returning sanity, so James made a start, and if the man had been cutting the first sod of a new railway, he couldn't have been more impressive. Have you ever tried digging in chalk? Believe me! it is the most heart-breaking job you can tackle! At the end of about an hour, when we had dug a trench just big enough to hold a small child, and were covered from head to foot in chalk, mould and little bits of sweet-smelling grass, James gave a crow of delight as his little pick struck on to stone. With swift, careful strokes, he scraped away the chalk, and there, sure enough, was the top of a narrow stone wall.

"'That seems to confirm it,' he said.

"'Don't jump to conclusions,' I answered. 'I don't want to depress you, but there's no signs of the mound, you know.'

"'Of course I realise that,' he snapped. 'It's probably weathered down, but with this wall for confirmation, I'm prepared to bet that we shall find something in the coppice itself. Let's try now.'

"I groaned, but agreed, so he rigged up his surveying poles and located the centre of the coppice. To my delight, we found that there was comparatively little undergrowth there, so we made a start. After a spell of roughish digging, I was moved to remark:

"'If it wasn't for the wall, I should look upon this as wasted effort.'

"I had hardly spoken, when my pick rang on stone, at this point only a foot or so below ground. James was frantic.

"'Do be careful!' he howled. 'I don't want more disturbance than we can help. We can't hope to do much ourselves now. We'll see if we can locate the tomb entrance, and leave the

completion of the digging till later.'

"A little more digging brought to light the end of the stone, and we worked downwards at right-angles to its edge. Yes—there was a slab of stone, making an end to a box-like structure. About half-way down, at the side of the upright slab, James found this clay tablet.

"So far as an archaeologist can be said to be surprised, he was. He spotted it for what it was—a counter to the evil eye, and in almost ludicrous impatience, asked, as you did, what the thing was doing there. However, he removed it, and started to lever up the vertical slab. He got it open far enough for us to glimpse the interior, when it slid over on to one side, catching his foot as it fell. To the man's eternal credit be it recorded that his first and only thought was for the safety of the slab and the plaque. I heaved the stone away, and he hopped about on one leg, imploring me to take care of it, to look at the bones we could just discern inside, to rejoice—and then he fainted.

"After a bit he recovered, and I helped him back to the car and ran him home, where his doctor diagnosed a crushed metatarsal bone, and sent him to bed. Poor little man! It nearly broke his heart. I promised to see that his find should be safeguarded, and perforce left him. It wasn't difficult for the mound to be hurdled off from the rest of the Down, and I'm sorry to confess that in the rush of work—my annual Report was overdue—I rather forgot about it.

"After about a fortnight, some local scandal was current about sheep maiming. It seems that the body of a valuable ram was found decapitated on the Downs. Of course, when an animal in a grazing district is killed, it is always some special beast, the value of which the horrified owner assesses at hundreds of pounds, but this seemed a very pointless outrage.

"All our local bad hats had cast-iron alibis, and neighbouring owners were

above suspicion. In any case, the beast wasn't valuable, and the fuss soon died down. But only for a day or so—a week in fact—for the outrage was repeated.

"I noticed that both killings were on Thursdays, and it dawned on me, after hearing rather more details, that both had happened near Jimmie's barrow. When I went round to see him, I told him about it, and, to my surprise, he seemed thoroughly upset. He asked for particulars, which I couldn't give him, and then dismissed me, rather curtly. As I went out, I heard him muttering: 'Thursday? . . . Thursday? . . . Now, I wonder . . . ?'

"Well, next Thursday, he rang me up, and told me he was going to the Down in the evening.

"'You can't,' I shrieked at him over the phone. 'You can't use that foot, surely. In any case . . . ?'

"'The medico has fixed it up in plaster. I'm going, and you are coming too,' he ordered.

"Well, what could I do? Against my better judgment, I collected him in the car after tea, and we set out.

"When we got to the coppice, or rather the road near it, he said: 'Now, my friend, we're going to watch, but from here, understand, from here. If what I think is true, it will be safer.'

"I didn't understand what he meant, but he seemed terribly in earnest.

"'Switch those lights off,' he said, 'and don't talk.'

"With becoming humility, I obeyed. We sat there in the warm summer evening for about an hour. The light faded from the sky, but a little moon gave a soft glimmer, which turned the downland to silver and made the coppice stand out like carved ebony. Over all brooded the peace of the Downs.

"Suddenly, James clutched my arm.

"'Look!' he whispered, his voice shaky with excitement. I caught my breath in frightened wonder.

"From the coppice strode the most magnificent figure I have ever seen. Picture to yourself a huge man, clad

in a surcoat of glimmering mail, his legs cross-gartered white. From his shoulders hung a sweeping cloak, and on his head was a great winged helmet. He carried a round shield and a mighty double-bladed axe.

"As he moved, the faint moonbeams lit up his braided fair hair, and glinted on the massive gold of his armlets. Yet for all his heavy accoutrements, he moved without sound. He walked out as far as the circling wall, where he turned and followed its course until he had completed its circuit. Then he faced towards the North Star, raised his great axe in salute—and vanished.

"Throughout this impressive ritual we had kept silent.

"'What under Heaven was that?' I asked.

"'That,' answered James, gravely, 'was the sheep-killer. Thank Heaven the Downs have few human wayfarers at night. Let's go and think this thing out.'

"Neither of us was inclined to talk until we regained home. Then James spoke.

"'I think you will agree,' he said, 'that we have stumbled on a strange happening, or rather the repetition of one.'

"'Why do you say repetition?' I asked.

"'Because of the plaque, and the wall,' he answered. 'I am positive that, if you have any records of this part of the country going back to about Tudor times, you would find that there were some pretty grim tragedies hereabouts. You will find that aid was sought from some local wise man or woman who, in this instance, really was wise. Though, of course, the sign against the evil eye is of Mediterranean origin, so perhaps some stalwart seafarer of Drake's day brought the knowledge home with him and passed it on to the local soothsayer. Who knows?'

"The encircling wall is rather more in accordance with Eastern ideas, so our friend was something of a traveller.

Anyway, the old Viking was sealed up in his lair until our accident let him out. Naturally, he would be more than usually active on the day of the great Thunder God—Thor of the Hammer, the Norse warrior God.'

"'But,' I said, 'if this long dead Norseman is still active, how are we going to quiet him down, as it were?'

"'By fire,' he answered. 'Do you think you are up to it?'

"'Yes.'

"The preparations took us some days. James insisted on pine logs, fish oil, a little powdered amber, and several things I don't know how to obtain, but he apparently did, and we built a great pyre on the Downs. Then, on Wednesday night, we brought the bones from the mound and placed them carefully on the oil-drenched logs. Then with fire struck from flint and steel, James set them ablaze.

"When all was a roaring furnace, we saw, for an instant, the same great figure in the heart of the flames.

"'May he reach his Valhalla!'

CHAPTER II

THE GIRDLE



ANOTHER afternoon found me in the Curator's fascinating sanctum. Truth to tell, I was frankly playing truant. There was plenty of work to be done, but I felt that some relaxation was definitely indicated.

When I entered his little room, I found him gazing at a metal hoop, with what I considered to be extravagant interest.

"'Why the rapt admiration for the old iron?' I asked foolishly.

Experience should have taught me that my friend would not waste his time on trivialities, and, though he might be,

indeed was, a dreamer, he was no day-dreamer. Most of the great constructive ideas, and many of the great achievements of mankind have had their genesis in dreams, but then we call them visions.

He looked up.

"Hello!" he said. "What was that you asked? Old iron? Yes, this, I think, is very old iron indeed. Make yourself as comfortable as you can, and I will tell you about it. It will clear my own ideas. Do you happen to remember a series of rather nasty fires in East Anglia? No? Well, to refresh your memory, I must tell you that there was a whole bunch of fires that seemed to have no ascertainable cause. You may say there was nothing unusual in that, and you would be wrong. Believe me, Insurance Companies, newspaper men, busy-bodies, and even sometimes coroners, take a tremendous interest in the origin of fires, and if one, to say nothing of a series, eludes their efforts, there is something highly unusual behind it.

"These fires I speak of were not confined to houses of any particular district, nor was any circumstance noted in common with them all, except that they all happened on the last day of the month. No—that isn't quite accurate, only on the thirty-first day of the month. If there were only thirty days in the month, no fires were reported. There was another circumstance in common too, but that didn't show itself till later. Nevertheless, it's this latter circumstance which interests us.

"The first fire broke out in a barn attached to a farm, and every single thing in it was destroyed. When the owner was inspecting the ruins, he tripped over something, which turned out to be a metal hoop. More from curiosity than any real interest, he asked casually what it was doing there, when one of his labourers said he had found it in a field and had chucked it into the barn in case it came in handy.

"The debris of the barn, including the hoop, was sold to a wandering rag-and-bone merchant, who took it to his store. At the end of the month, his premises were burnt out, to the poor old chap's dismay, again the hoop was among the scanty salvage, and was thrown with the ashes on to a piece of commonland adjoining. This too caught fire, and did a tremendous amount of damage before it was put out.

"You may ask how I know all this. Well, it's easy to be wise after the event, isn't it? I was 'put wise' in a rather dramatic fashion, and I made a point of tracing things back as far as I could.

"This last fire on the common died down not far from where I was staying at that time, so one evening I thought I'd potter round in the car and have a morbid kind of sight-seeing. I kept to the roads, of course, but even from them I could see the enormous extent of the fire.

"As I was driving home through the half-light, I noticed a glow in a hollow not far from the road. I fancied there might be some smouldering ashes too close to the road for safety, so I got out to investigate and without any difficulty I located the source of the light. Lying on a bed of blackened ash was a glowing circle.

"I frankly confess I was frightened. There was no actual fire there, the surrounding masses of charred wood and heather were quite cold, and yet there was that red-hot, wicked-looking ring. 'Why?' I asked myself. 'Why is this blessed bit of metal still hot—red-hot, mark you?' and I couldn't answer myself.

"To move it was out of the question, so, out of sheer curiosity, I marked the spot, and drove home. On the following morning, bright and early, I went back and found the hoop without difficulty, but it was now cold and rusty.

"When I came to examine it, I found it was fairly heavy, but showed no un-

usual features. There was nothing attached to it, I mean, no gadgets of any kind that might produce artificial light, nor was it made of any rare or uncommon substance. It was just an ordinary iron hoop off a barrel.

"But, I thought with something of a shock, the heath fire had been out for a month—yes, exactly a month to the day, and yet that iron—— I tell you, it worried me—it was all wrong. I put it in the car and went on to my friend's house.

"At the end of my visit, I motored back here, the hoop forgotten, still in the dicky of the car. It wasn't for some time that I remembered it, what made me so forgetful I can't think, but one day I wanted a spanner or something from the back of the car, and there I found it.

"Thank Heaven I did! I put it down on the concrete floor of the garage, and, as I looked at it, it started to glow. I gazed at it in a fascinated way, much, I suppose, as a bird watches a snake. As I stood there, a vague picture seemed to form in it, outlined by the hot metal. I saw a village green, with many people in what I took to be Stuart dress, standing about in groups, all very fearful and apprehensive. In the centre of the green was a stake towards which a woman was being hustled by a crowd of surly looking ruffians in dark, severe clothes.

"Then the vision, if vision it were, faded. I found myself trembling with horror, but I had now some idea as to the origin of the mystery. Stuart times—stake—I was on the track. I came back here to the library, and turned up the most likely reference, James the First, and, as a natural corollary, Matthew Hopkins's *Witchfinder General* and prince of rogues.

"Among a mass of information about familiars, tests, witchmarks and the like, I came on a reference to one poor soul sentenced to the stake who, as they were riveting her poor old body to it, promised that fire should eternally

follow any relic that might resist her present ordeal, whenever the month should show the magic numbers—3 and 1.

"The only thing that did was the girdle I found."

CHAPTER III

THE STONE



It was a bitter day. Cold winds whistled through the streets, the pavements were dangerous with a glaze of ice, and the few people who were about all seemed to be wishing that they were comfortably indoors.

I had had a busy, worrying morning and afternoon, and when the round was finished, I took care to end up close to the Museum. As I passed through the Main Hall, I thought the Neolithic Lady looked even more uncomfortable than usual. Still, I suppose she is getting accustomed to her chilly surroundings by this time.

I found the Curator in front of his fire, and he gave me his usual cheery greeting; nay, more, he shared his tea and toast with me. When we were smoking our cigarettes, he reached up to a shelf above his head and handed me a piece of dressed stone. It was about a foot by eighteen inches in measurement, and about two inches thick. A shallow depression had been hollowed out at one end, leading to a narrow, much worn channel which passed down the middle, to disappear over the other end. Round the edges, I could just detect the remains of letters carved in the stone, but it was

so much eroded that I was unable to decipher them.

"Where did this come from?" I asked the Curator.

"From Lady Kayling's rockery," he answered, as solemn as a bench of Bishops.

"I beg your pardon," I replied, as gravely. "I didn't know you had taken up landscape gardening. Do you find it a profitable sideline?"

"If this wasn't a particularly good specimen, I would throw it at you!" he retorted. "When I said we got it from the Dowager's rock-garden, I was speaking the literal truth, or nearly so. This, actually, is one of our few copies. The original is . . . But I'll tell you about it.

"I can say without fear of contradiction that, when I first knew her ladyship, she was the most cantankerous old harridan that ever disgraced one of our stately homes of England. She was fabulously wealthy, and as mean as they make 'em. She lived in a glorious old house in the West Country, with enough beautiful things in it to stock this Museum; but for all the interest she took in them, or for all the care she spent on their preservation, they might just as well have been junk from a marine store dealer's back yard.

"But the old trout had one redeeming feature. She was passionately devoted to her garden. She took the greatest possible pride in it, and no care or expense was too much to lavish on it, and the result was magnificent. I doubt if there was a more perfectly planned or more beautifully laid-out garden in the West. In fact 'garden' is quite an inadequate word for it. 'Pleasaunce' would be nearer the mark, and more in keeping.

"But she was always looking about for some way of improving it, of getting more out of it; but, in common fairness, one must admit that she is not alone in this ambition—I think it is fairly common among gardeners. Be that as it may, she decided that one

corner of the garden was to be re-organised.

"It was rather a beautiful little corner, somewhat cut off from the rest of the grounds, and it was bordered on two sides by a little coppice which, one presumes for the sake of contrast, had been permitted to stay wild. She decreed that here should be a rockery, or, more precisely, a rock garden.

"It was to be carefully designed, so as to be in keeping with its surroundings, the stones for it were to be hand-picked, and it was to be planted with the finest and most suitable plants obtainable, and so it was done. A skilled man was called in, a small army of labourers worked under his direction, and the result was a gardener's Dream of Heaven.

"I regret to say that I am neither artist nor gardener, so I can't describe it adequately, but I can tell you that there were cunningly designed paths that twisted about among rocks, cut so cleverly that they looked like natural boulders, always rising until they reached the centre, where they curved round a heap of stones piled in artistic disorder, and capped by a flat rock. This, the head gardener said, had been unearthed in the adjoining coppice, and had been set aside as a fitting coping stone for the whole structure.

"Over all was a riot of blossoms. Don't ask me what they were—as I have said, I am no gardener. Of course, all this took time, as well as patience and skill, but it was well worth it; even Lady Kayling was satisfied, and that in itself speaks volumes.

"And all was well until the end of the second spring after the completion of the work, when her ladyship spotted a hoof-mark in the sacred gravel of one of her precious paths. Just a little hoof-mark, not much bigger than half a crown, but there it was, flaunting itself to her indignant gaze.

"It would be a gross understatement to say she was annoyed. The entire outdoor staff was mobilised and a search

made for the intruder. From the size and shape of the mark, it was agreed that the beast so lost to all sense of shame that it had invaded this garden above all others, was probably a lamb or kid, but despite the most careful hunting nothing was found.

"The only matter which occasioned any comment among the staff was that her ladyship was much less wrathful than anybody had a right to expect, but they all put it down to that spring-feeling, or something equally nebulous. Then, one day, the old lady found a rather crumpled little bunch of flowers lying on the top stone, and she was certain she saw a small child among the trees of the coppice. This notion she naturally dismissed as absurd, but the horrified gardener who was called to remove the dead flowers from the stone, was amazed to find her smiling!

"Strange as it may seem, this little comedy was repeated several times that spring, always in the same way, the flowers, the hoof-mark, and the hint of a child in the coppice. But in June, on Midsummer Day to be exact, the little mystery was resolved, or at least her ladyship says it was.

"I only came into the story later, but from what I can gather, on that June morning, as she walked through her special garden, she surprised an infant satyr carefully laying a bunch of meadow flowers on the stone. The old dame swears it was no illusion, and I, for one, would be loath to rob her of her dream. She called me in to examine the stone, and she let me take a cast of it, as you see. What is it? My dear chap! I should have thought you would have spotted it by this time. It is a practically complete altar to Pan."

CHAPTER IV

THE BOARD

ONE afternoon, when I went into my friend the Curator's room, I noticed a

piece of wood leaning against his book-case.

By this time, being reasonably observant, I was fairly well acquainted, if only by sight, with the hundred and one objects he collected round him in his sanctum, so that anything new attracted my attention. Not that his latest acquisition needed any occult powers of observation to discern it.

There it stood, a very ordinary rectangle of wood, about two feet by one foot, but what made it glaringly conspicuous was the fact that it had been painted a bilious shade of light green. I cannot claim any special artistic sense, but this particular colour, standing out in all its stark crudeness against the beautiful dark wood of the bookcase, jarred like a squeaking slate-pencil.

"Tell me," I urged my friend. "Tell me why you have imported this horrible thing! Don't say it is a specimen for the Museum, unless you are starting a department of awful warnings."

"As a matter of fact," he answered, turning from his desk and looking at the board with an intent gaze. "As a matter of fact, if we had such a department, that is just where that board would be. Have a look at it."

Now, by this time I had learnt a little, not very much, perhaps, but enough to know that in the Curator's room, things are not always what they seem. Accordingly, I approached the board with all due caution, but when I picked it up nothing untoward occurred. I noticed that my friend was smiling at me, in much the same way as a father smiles at a venturesome child.

"You're quite safe, Doc.," he said. "It won't do any harm. Now."

He took it from me, and turned it over, so that the other side was exposed to view. Even then, it seemed a very ordinary oak board, except perhaps for its graining, which was very beautiful, so beautiful indeed that the awful paint on the other side seemed



more horrible than ever. I noticed, too, that the paint was thick—not just a smear to cover the wood, but a thick layer of white lead, with that terrible green over it.

"I am dense," I said. "I admit that I am dense, but I cannot see why anyone should want to cover up a good piece of oak with that loathsome paint or, for that matter, why you should want to preserve the horror. I suppose you do want to preserve it, by the way?"

"Most certainly I do," he answered. "It's from the door of a pub bedroom—I'll tell you.

"This particular specimen—for it is a specimen—did not originate in this part of the country at all. It was given to us by the landlord of a very decent pub in Dartfleet. Dartfleet is one of those West Country towns which had something of a reputation in days gone by, lapsed into obscurity, and then came to life again as popular seaside resorts.

"This story does not concern the Dartfleet of history, if it ever had a history, but the modern town, or rather one of its hotels. When I said pub a moment ago, I was thinking back a little. This hotel, though it belongs to the modern era, prides itself somewhat on its old-world air. Indeed, it went out of its way to foster the idea that it had been in existence for centuries. That's rather the fashion with hotels nowadays, I find, especially if they are built in old towns.

"Be that as it may, these people had taken considerable pains to equip

the place with inglenooks, old brass and copper, ancient weapons and the like, and a very good job they made of it. They had a couple of pieces of tapestry, which, if I were a wealthy man . . .

"Well, one of the earlier guests, I mean by that one of the people who stayed there when the place was first opened, was a fellow named Cartwright. He was a business man in the City, something to do with foreign railways, I fancy, and a very shrewd, hard-headed chap. Like so many Londoners, he had a romantic streak in him, and this hotel with its genuine antiques and its twentieth-century luxury, appealed to him tremendously. Here he would spend his holiday, and nowhere else. He moved in, and was allotted a room in the ordinary way and was charmed with it. Everything was exactly right. Nothing was lacking in the way of modern lighting, telephone and up-to-date fittings, yet the room seemed really old.

"Now, in his case, the holiday was necessary. He had been working hard and really needed the rest so, on his first evening, what with the long journey, his somewhat jaded condition and, perhaps, a very good dinner, he went up early, and slept as a really tired man ought to sleep. At least, he did for the first couple of hours or so, but then he found himself wide awake.

"His bed faced the door, and the first thing he saw was an evil-looking face leering at him from the upper right-hand panel. He described it as that of a coarse, brutal-looking man. The features were lined, the eyes sunken, while the mouth, with its blackened, broken teeth, grinned at him in sneering amusement.

"No light was burning in the room, nor did any penetrate from the street, but there was that face clearly visible in all its animal savagery. There was no question of its being a dream. He was wide awake, and his first thought was that he was looking at a would-be hotel thief who was spying out the land

through a carefully prepared slot in the door.

"A second convinced him that this explanation would not do, for he became conscious of the fact that he could see the graining of the wood through the face. Moreover, there was no movement, no twitching of the face muscles, no puckering of the eyelids, no sound. Just this mask-like face, with its cruel grin.

"As he watched it, he was aware of a close, muggy dampness in the atmosphere of the room, and the smell of tar and rank humanity. This lasted for about two minutes, when the face faded and the other manifestations disappeared, leaving the room in its former freshness. If there was one man on earth I should say was incapable of panic, that man is Cartwright, but he says he was absolutely terrified, not just frightened or alarmed, but scared to the very depths of his being. He acknowledges that he was out of condition and run down, but even allowing for that, he confesses to real fear.

"He passed the rest of the night as best he could, determined to leave in the morning, which he did, but before he went, he took the manager aside, and told him what had happened. This worthy man was inclined to put the whole thing down to nerves, but Cartwright, by his insistence, made him uneasy for the reputation of the hotel. While he might pooh-pooh any idea of the occult himself, he knew that stories of this kind grow in the telling, so rather than risk a repetition of such happenings, he had the room rearranged and the door heavily painted.

"This latter at least proves his good intentions, even if it is some reflection on his taste in colour. But it didn't cure the trouble. An elderly lady, who occupied the room after its redecoration, had violent hysterics all down the hotel corridor and threatened legal proceedings. She, too, babbled of the leering face in the panel, now probably

even more ghastly when viewed on a green background. This time, the manager decided on a root and branch cure, and sent it to us for investigation."

I again examined the board, but I could detect nothing unusual; then the Curator tilted it over, so that the light shone on the unpainted side. When he pointed it out, I could just make out a faint "M" that, at one time, must have been branded into the wood.

"Morgan," said the Curator tersely. "I wonder how many poor souls have walked to their deaths along this plank?"

CHAPTER V

THE WHALE



ONE afternoon, when I went into the Museum, I found my friend the Curator absolutely cock-a-hoop. No other phrase could describe the boyish—I had almost written childish

—enthusiasm with which he positively thrust what I took to be a picture into my hands.

"Behold me!" exclaimed this infantile savant. "Regardez-moi, reincarnation of Holmes, Le Coq, Sexton Blake, old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all!"

"There! there!" I murmured. "Sit down quietly, light a cigarette, and tell me all about it."

"Seriously, Doc., " he said, "there is quite a suggestion of a mystery story about that piece. Look at it carefully."

I did. It was, so far as I could see, a representation of Jonah's deliverance

from the whale. There was a yellow sandy beach, liberally sprinkled with shells and starfish, on which that much travelled prophet was kneeling, presumably in thanksgiving. Despite his unorthodox and cheerless mode of transport, he looked singularly spick and span, his clothes tidy and his hair neatly brushed.

"To one side, half in and half out of the sea, which curled in precise, orderly waves to the shore, lay the whale. The artist had evidently taken as his model one of those dolphin-like creatures you see grouped round the tombs of departed admirals. It had a great head, which was split by a wide mouth and which hinged into a small sealy body. The "great fish" of the scriptures beamed at Jonah, as much as to say that it was only too pleased to have been of service to him, a fact which the ungrateful man seemed to ignore.

"Not specially beautiful, if edifying?" I remarked. "How did you get hold of it?"

"The story," he answered with mock gravity, "is as follows. Make yourself comfortable, and pass the cigarettes. This picture is one from the famous collection at Mullcombe Hall, or rather, it isn't, if you follow me."

"Of course I don't," I retorted. "Do settle down and tell me about it as it excites you so mnuch."

"Mullcombe Hall," he began, "is one of our less cheerful Manor Houses. It is owned by Miss Mullcombe, who is very old, selfish and Early Victorian. She is, moreover, a lady who thoroughly enjoys bad health. Heart, I fancy. Anyhow, she lives in that barn of a place, cluttered up with ponderous furniture, wool mats, wax fruits, and all the fussiness of that depressing period, and worships every stick of it.

"A feature of the house, if so uninteresting a place can be said to have features, is what is known as the Oak Gallery, a rather pretentious name for a wide corridor, panelled almost to the

ceiling. Above the panelling is a strip of dull paper, ornamented with a pattern of huge, unthinkable vegetable growths, but, let into the panelling, is the collection of pictures which is the pride of the old lady's heart, and the despair of everyone else.

"The collection consists of a series of paintings depicting some of the gloomier episodes in the Old Testament. There was a gory little scene showing the bears devouring the luckless children who had taunted the bald head, another showing, with unnecessary detail, the slaying of the prophets of Baal, and so on. The only one at all cheerful is this one of our friend Jonah. The servants call them the 'Oly 'Orrors,' and they aren't far wrong. To be fair, they are valuable, for they are genuine early Dutch, but that doesn't make them beautiful.

"As I have said, the old dame worshipped them, almost as much, in fact, as she did her nephew George, who lived with her. From what little I have heard, young George didn't deserve a thousandth part of the devotion the old lady lavished on him. He managed to combine most of the vices of the past and present, and to avoid, with almost uncanny accuracy, any of their virtues.

"And yet, as so frequently happens, he could be charming, and the old lady would never bring herself to believe that her idol's feet were of very common clay. He managed to give her the idea, and a very firmly fixed idea it was, that her interests were his, her gods his gods and so forth, so that, naturally, he displayed a really good shop-window of superficial knowledge of the contents of the Hall.

"He could, and did, talk intelligently and amusingly about the atrocities with which the Hall was crammed, but he was careful never to disparage them to the old lady. To all outward appearance, his life was passed in the most decorous manner, but one or two ugly little rumours got about, despite his careful precautions.

"One night, the even tenor of the way of the Hall was rudely shattered. It was the old lady's habit to potter up to bed about ten o'clock, after having satisfied herself that all the old-fashioned anti-burglar devices were in working order. She always cut off the light at the main, in case of fire, and went upstairs and along the corridor with no other light but a candle. Not for her electric torches or two-way switches. Weren't men killed in America by electricity? Of course they were! Very well, then!

"This evening she followed her usual routine with religious fidelity. The house was dark and still but for the old lady and her flickering candle passing along the gallery, when the rest of the household was alarmed by a piercing scream and the sound of a fall. Everybody bundled out, just as they did in *Ingoldsby Legneds* and scurried about the house in the half-timid, half-valiant way people do, in such crises, and, lying on the floor of the Gallery they found her in a state of collapse.

"They carried her to bed, and sent for the doctor who, I believe, had some difficulty in getting her round. When she did recover, she seemed dazed and wandering in her mind, for she kept muttering: 'The Whale! it moved!' The poor old soul was thoroughly ill and nervy, and remained so for some little time, but even when she was more herself again, she persisted in affirming that she distinctly saw the whale in the picture of Jonah and the whale, swim from side to side of the frame.

"And nothing could shake her in this. Quite clearly and coherently she said that, as she passed her beloved pictures, she distinctly saw this particular one light up. The waves seemed to ripple along the shore as though the sea was in movement, and the great dolphin-like fish swam with rhythmic movements in the waters.

"Naturally, everyone was certain that she was suffering from some form of senile dementia, hallucinations, or

as the domestic staff more tersely put it: 'Bats.' But nothing else seemed to confirm this diagnosis. She was perfectly rational and insisted that I should be called in to investigate.

"How, in the name of fortune, she knew of me is a mystery in itself, but 'more people know Tom Fool' and so on. Anyhow, I went down and saw her, a frail little old woman, but determination itself. She repeated to me the story of the moving waters and the swimming whale, but amplified her former statement by telling me that there was no sound during this occult demonstration, nor did the prophet himself move.

"'It was just as if the shadow of the whale moved through the rippling water. Do you think it means anything? Any misfortune to our Navy, or the Church, or anything like that?' Yes, she was of the generation that looked for signs. I did my best to reassure her, and went to examine the picture.

"I could see nothing unusual about the thing, except its inherent hideousness, but when I cautiously tapped it, a few grains of sawdust floated down to the floor, fresh sawdust at that. This puzzled me a little, so I looked more closely. At the top of the frame, a very thin, silk-covered wire wound its way upwards, carefully following the outline of the foliage on the paper, until it passed through a small hole, high up in the woodwork.

"Well, that effectively disposed of the supernatural. The Other Side doesn't need electric fittings to help it. I very carefully unscrewed the picture from its setting in the wall, and a glance was enough to show me that it was an obvious fake, painted on parchment. Behind it was a small cavity in the wall, about one brick deep and in it was one of those flat, rectangular specimen glasses, half-full of water, in which swam merrily a tadpole. Behind the glass was a small green electric globe—

"'Oh! yes, of course, the nephew.'

CHAPTER VI

THE SIGNET



It was one of those spring days the physician loathes, muggy and close, with a threat of rain that didn't fall. It meant that the usual crop of chills and infectious diseases would soon be upon us, with the consequence that an already busy profession would be worked to death.

Already I had more cases of measles on my visiting list than I cared about—measles can be a very nasty illness indeed—and many an anxious mother was getting worried as to whether little Billy would be fit to go back to school.

I finished a long round conveniently close to the Museum, so I went in to have a "stand easy" with the Curator. I found him examining a small object with his usual careful scrutiny.

"Cheerio, Doc," he said, looking up as I entered the room. "That's rather a beautiful little piece, isn't it?" and he handed me the object at which he had been looking.

It was an exquisite little ring, of rather old-fashioned design. On a thin band of gold was set a beautiful flat emerald, on which several intertwined letters had been engraved. The stone was set on a foil, which enhanced its beauty, and made the letters stand out.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

"Immediately, from Cranmere Hall," he answered. "Before that . . . I can't say . . . a rather warm corner of . . . But I'll tell you. Take a cigarette, and settle down."

"As I said, this ring came from Cranmere Hall, by way of some rather nice people who bought it some little while back. They are, I find, rather disgustingly wealthy, but pleasant withal, and they had taken over the entire contents with the house when the last Duchess

decided that she must sell, or forgo baccarat.

"The Hall itself is rather beautiful, but its furniture and pictures are superb, mostly real, bona fide Jacobean, and hardly a single piece has had to be restored. It's not a big place, as such places go, nor is it cluttered up with a mass of gear, but what there is, is wonderful. Fortunately, the new owners—Smith is their unusual name—decided to interfere with nothing. They left the old rooms and their fittings more or less as they had always been, and contented themselves with modernising the lighting and plumbing, not a moment before it was needed!

"A feature of the place is the Hall, and when I say 'hall' I am using the word in its old, true meaning. Exquisitely proportioned, it has a high raftered roof, a noble fireplace, and at the other end, a little minstrels' gallery. Hung on the walls, in all the dignity of their faded colouring, are one or two banners, a stand or so of arms, and one picture.

"The artist is unknown, which is a pity, for it is a masterly thing. It is the portrait of a man in the pride of his youth. He is dressed in half armour, a broad collar of lace falling over his corslet, from which rises a noble young head, the lips smiling, the eyes alert and bright. Not for this young gallant the disillusionments of old age, for he died on the scaffold, after the '45.

"As I said, the Smiths are rich and hospitable, but on the occasion of which I am speaking, it so happened that none but the family were at the Hall. It was a foul night, a high wind was lashing the sleet against the windows, and howling round the corners of the house. The family was in the hall after dinner, congratulating one another that nothing need take them out on such a night, when, with a discreet tap on the door, the butler came in and told them that a gentleman, overcome by the weather, begged shelter.

"I rather fancy, sir," added the butler, "that he is some type of—ahem!—clergyman."

"Naturally, old Smith insisted on his coming in at once, and, almost on the butler's heels, a bedraggled individual entered the hall. He was tall and gaunt, his features lined and severe, and his clothes, while not ordinary clerical, suggested the ecclesiastic, the kind of sartorial compromise affected by unattached ministers.

"They made him very welcome, and did what they could to make him less uncomfortable, but to all their ministrations, he replied with curt but polite answers. He offered no account of himself, or any explanation as to how he came to be on the road on such a night, nor did he seem in the least grateful for their hospitality. He just sat in front of the fire, barely answering when they spoke to him, until they began to get a little embarrassed. After a pause, longer and more empty than before, they noticed that he was looking at the picture. Looking, did I say? Glaring, gloating, would be more accurate.

"'I remember you!' he said suddenly, in a voice harsh with excitement. 'I remember you! Still smiling, are you? Still dreaming of the fleshpots of Egypt, and silken luxuries of the man Charles Stuart? I remember you, my fine young popinjay, but you would never remember me.'

"'Aye, well do I remember the day when the righteous anger of the Saints was appeased, when you and your godless friends came out into the marketplace to meet your just doom. You laughed and talked with your companions, didn't you? You ran gaily up the scaffold steps, as though to meet one of your painted women. You smiled at me, standing at the block, and gave me a bauble to strike well and truly.'

"'Faugh! what did I want with your womanly trinkets? Enough reward for me that another malignant was to pass to damnation at my hands. Aye, I struck well, young man, did I not? The

Father of Lies did not have to wait long for his servant!'

"To say that the Smiths were astonished is to put it mildly. They were so amazed that they could do nothing but stare at this extraordinary visitor.

"'Is he ill, or tight?' they whispered. 'Shall we get him up to bed?'

"But as they wondered, a change came over the gaunt figure huddled in its high chair. It wilted and crumbled before their horrified gaze, until nothing remained but a little heap of dust in the middle of which this great emerald glowed.

CHAPTER VII

THE BRONZE



I HAD seen nothing of my friend the Curator for several weeks. I had been taking the seven days leave

which represents the average G.P.'s annual holiday, and this, combined with the extra work before and after my "time off" had more than filled my days. But when I had got things back into their usual routine, so far as a doctor's work can be said to have a routine, I promised myself the treat of a visit to him at the earliest opportunity. I soon made that opportunity, and one evening found me mounting the familiar stairs.

I discovered him finishing his tea, to my openly expressed regret, but he offered me the usual pink tin and I made myself comfortable with a cigarette. We exchanged news and views for a while. He was interested to hear my small adventures while away and confessed, handsomely I thought, that he had missed our talks together.

"I had this brought in to me, the

other day," he remarked handing me a fairly big object.

I took it from him, and examined it carefully. It was a very beautifully designed ram's head, in bronze. The artist who had fashioned it had made it in such a way that the animal seemed to be peering forward, the ears laid back on the head, while the great horns hardly rose above the skull, but swept downwards in beautiful curves. The neck was hollow, the edges of the metal being finished off in a smooth ring. It was about as big as two fists put together and, although it was stoutly made it was neither heavy nor cumbersome.

"And who gave you this?" I asked.

"A policeman," was his rather unexpected reply.

"How did our local constabulary get hold of a piece like that?" I asked. "Has Bill Sykes turned æsthetic in his hoary old age?"

"No," said he. "This is no part of a burglar's loot. It came from a motor accident. Let me tell you about it.

"Do you know the gravel pits on the Curchester road, about five miles from here? Of course you do, you must have passed them scores of times, but very likely they haven't meant very much to you. For that matter, I don't suppose they have meant much to anyone else for years, because they have not been worked for some time. Within the past few weeks, however, the owners have thought it worth while to begin taking the gravel again, so they started a small gang of men to dig them.

"I'm not sufficiently skilled in geology or weather lore to give you a reason, but I can tell you that after the gang had been at work for a couple of days or so, there was something in the nature of a small landslide, and a mass of gravel came down with a run.

"Fortunately, no one was hurt, but it rather frightened everybody, and the owners decided, wisely, I think, to leave it alone for the time being, so they put a fence round it, and packed up.

"A few nights after the subsidence, an old farmer, named Jarcomb, was driving home at about nine in the evening when he heard what he took to be a runaway horse and cart coming towards him. You know yourself how narrow and winding the road is over the gravel pits, and it must be admitted that old Jarcomb is no bigoted T.T., but with the true countryman's care for the safety of his beast, to say nothing of his own, he instinctively pulled into the side of the road, and waited for the cart to come up to him.

"The lane remained quite as empty as usual, and the old boy thought that the strong waters of the local pub must have been less U.P. than he had hitherto credited. But he is far too experienced in the sounds of the countryside to confuse the noise—to which he swears, by the way—to confuse it with any sound such as wind or straying cattle.

"As he sat there in his cart, he heard the thudding of hooves, and the rattle and banging of wheels approach, pass him and fade into the distance. And not a thing to be seen. He got down, very solemn and puzzled, to find his own horse trembling and sweating; in fact he had to lead it the rest of the way home.

"The following day he told some of his cronies about it, and was unmercifully chaffed. Comments ranged from broad jests about straying donkeys (with many rustic puns) to urgent exhortations to "take more water with it" until the old chap himself began to doubt the evidence of his own senses. He did not forget, however, the state of his horse, but kept his own counsel on that matter. Needless to say, the story went the rounds, with suitable embellishments, not that anyone took it seriously, except perhaps Mrs. Jarcomb.

"But a very different, and more serious event occurred a few nights later. You will remember that, after you pass the gravel pits there is a comparatively straight piece of road. On this particu-

lar evening, a young fellow was driving his car home, and as he turned into the straight he heard and saw coming towards him, a magnificent but terrifying sight.

"Sweeping down on him, at a terrific speed, was a Roman chariot. Four horses, urged to the last ounce of their endeavour by a dimly seen charioteer, galloped hell for leather towards him, their manes streaming behind them, and foam flying from round their bits. Breathless with fright, the young fellow wrenched his wheel round, mounted the bank, and turned over.

"Fortunately, he escaped with a few superficial cuts, but when he extricated himself from the wreckage, he found himself absolutely alone in the road. There was no sign of any vehicle; no marks on the road, no sound, but firmly embedded in his radiator was the bronze end of the chariot pole. The following morning, pieces of wood and metal, mixed with human and animal bones, were found in the gravel at the landslide.

"Curchester means 'the Camp of the Chariot,' doesn't it, Doc?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE WINGED HORROR



ONE morning, just as I was setting out on my round, the phone bell rang. This is far too frequent an occurrence to excite comment, except perhaps a n expression of

thanks that it had happened before I set out. All too frequently, it is just after you leave the house that the messages come in, which means that you

may have to retrace your steps at the end of the morning, when you were hoping for lunch. This time, however, it was the Curator on the line.

"If you're near the Museum this evening," he said, "I've something to show you."

Naturally, I said I would do my best to be there.

Five o'clock, therefore, saw me in the familiar room. When we were comfortably settled—the Curator is far too wise a man to attempt anything of the nature of a discussion in discomfort—he very carefully opened a small wooden box, such as is used for microscopic slides, and carefully extracted from it what seemed to me to be a piece of leather.

"This," he said, "is, if you but knew, one of the most remarkable specimens we have had sent to us for many a long day. Does to suggest anything to you? Take care how you handle it! One moment! Let me put it on this tile."

As he spoke, he took down a porcelain tile from a rack, and with the aid of two mounted needles, arranged the leather on it. When I looked at it more closely, I saw that it was not leather as I had at first supposed, but some form of rather thick membrane. The Curator passed me a lens and I examined the specimen in more detail. It was about four inches square, of a greyish brown colour. It was translucent, and I could see structures which might be blood-vessels or nerves running the length of the specimen.

If I were right, and I was fairly certain that I was, this suggested an animal origin, while the absence of hair, feathers or down gave no absolute pointer as to which family of the animal kingdom it came from, nor, for that matter, what part of any special animal. This rather negative conclusion I passed on to the Curator.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I have inside information as to the source of this piece of tissue, so I will tell you

at once that it is wing membrane."

"From some species of bat, I suppose?" I asked.

"No," he rejoined. "Nothing so commonplace. I'll tell you."

As soon as I heard that slogan, I knew I could anticipate some unusual story.

"This tale might have had a very nasty ending," he began. "It is possible that you have found some of my stories difficult to believe. . . ."

I hastened to make noises of polite dissent.

". . . but this one is vouched for by several witnesses. There is the lady herself, for example. . . . But let me begin at the beginning.

"This piece of membrane came from Wales, a principality which has produced many remarkable phenomena and which is fortunate in possessing many remains of profound interest to the archaeologist; I need not dilate on its excellencies.

"For the moment, it is the mining industry which interests us, for it was from a mine that this specimen came, not exactly from the coal seam itself, but from a cavern under the ground, which was met with in the course of mining operations. At the moment, I am unable to give you any geological details, but I understand that such conditions do occur.

"Not very far from this particular mine, is the country house of a Mrs. Booth, a rather vivacious lady, presumed to be a widow—there is no obvious Mr. Booth, anyway—who lives in some state, is very good to the local miners' children and is generally admired. I'm not being cheaply facetious about the lady. She is a very good sort indeed, hospitable, kind, and very sensible. A more level-headed person would be difficult to find, and she is obviously no unsophisticated country lass who might presumably make mountains out of mole-hills. I hope I have described her adequately, for her evidence is most important in this unusual affair.

"To begin at the beginning, it seems that this cavern I mentioned just now was encountered as the men were about to leave the mine, and beyond reporting the fact, and taking care that there were no noxious vapours, or other known mining perils to guard against, they knocked off work, and came to the surface in the ordinary way. So far, everything is prosaically normal, but wait a moment!

"By the time all the men had left, it was dark, and no one noticed anything unusual. At about this same time, Mrs. Booth was in her own room, changing for some party or other she was going to, when she heard something heavy settle on her window-ledge. The house is a large one, built on rather massive lines, so the window-ledges are not the narrow affairs we are accustomed to, but broad, thick slabs of stone. So the bird, or whatever it was, would have no difficulty in finding room on which to lodge.

"Naturally, the curtains were drawn, so Mrs. Booth could see nothing, but she was sufficiently curious to wonder what it might be. Her impression was that it must be an owl, but there seemed to be too much noise for that silent flying bird. The lady could hear a scraping, as of claws being dragged along the stone, and a snapping sound, like a big dog snapping at flies. Mingled, as it were, with these, was a continuous dry rustle.

"She wondered what it might be, and, not unnaturally, was somewhat alarmed. While not excessively superstitious, she had her fair share of that mistrust of the unknown, which is far commoner than most of us have the courage to confess, so her immediate action argues that she was not deficient in strength of will. She pulled back the curtain . . . and stood rooted to the floor in horror.

"On the ledge, clearly visible in the strong light that flooded the room, was a nightmare shape. Crouching on the stone was some living thing that had no right in this everyday world of ours.

It was about a yard high, greyish in colour, and malevolent of aspect. From a squat, shapeless body projected a thin, scraggy neck, which supported a small head, but on this head was a long wicked-looking beak, armed with savage teeth. To complete the awful picture, two great bat-like wings spread out on either side. If some medieval craftsman, bent on providing a particularly loathsome gargoyle, had achieved this horror in stone, and then had given that stone the evil semblance of life—this is what he would have produced.

"The lady, unable for the moment to credit the evidence of her senses, gazed at this monstrous apparition in wondering horror. As though to assure her that it was no subjective fantasy of her brain, the creature turned its evil head towards her, looked at her from little, bright eyes, and clashed its jaws. At this convincing proof of its reality, she could stand no more, and, mercifully, fainted. Her maid found her about half an hour later, when her condition was too overwrought for her to be able to give any coherent account of what she had seen, but an examination of the window-ledges revealed numerous deep scratches in the stone, which dispelled any idea of the whole thing being an illusion.

"A few nights later, miles away, here in our own Wessex, the dignified calm of a village pub was rudely shattered, when one, George Mole, a notorious poacher, dashed into the snugger, and declared he had seen the devil. 'But I shot at 'im,' he affirmed between sips of brandy, 'an' I knocked 'im vlyng into Davis's 'ayrick. Now, don'tee get scared, Davis. I warn't arter your blinkin' 'ens! I shot the devil, I 'ave. I seed 'is girt wings vlappin' there, an' 'is garsley girt tusks, an' I ran like 'ell!'

"Several of the bolder habituées were for turning out at once to verify this remarkable tale, but more cautious councils prevailed, so, on the following morning, a committee went to inspect the rick. Carefully climbing a ladder,

they found that the top of the thatch was torn, and there was some blood there, but one of the keen-sighted committeemen spotted this piece of membrane, caught on a peg of the thatch. He had the sense to hand it over to the vicar, who passed it on to me.

"Now, Doc., what I'm wondering is this: Should we be very far off the mark, taking into account the stories we have heard and having regard to the evidence before us, should we be very far out in saying that, when they opened that cavern, they released a pterodactyl? . . . I wonder. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

"DEAD YESTERDAY"



I TURNED into the Museum one evening, just as dusk was falling. The building is closed to the public at sunset, in common with most institutions of a similar character, but during the winter

months, the hour is arbitrarily fixed at 6 p.m. This gives the enquiring wanderer no excuse for saying he has no time in which to visit his local collection, while it allows the staff to get away at a reasonable hour.

The lights were all turned on, including the great arc in the ceiling, so that the various cases and large mounted groups were clearly visible. Perhaps the shadows cast by the specimens were rather more clearly cut than in ordinary diffused daylight, but the many ingenious devices of the present-day electrician made the components of

the various groups as easy to distinguish as at high noon.

So when I passed the Stone Age lady and lifted my hat in salute, I could at once observe that she wasn't looking at me! I was burt—I missed that wide, if vacant, grin from her bony jaws and quite apart from what may be called the social side of the affair, I didn't admire her back. A vertebral column, even a modern one, is a very notched, irregular affair, and hers was many centuries old! A glance showed me that the other objects in the case were in their usual positions, but there were marks in the sand on the floor of the cave which suggested that the bones had been recently disturbed. The specimen is enclosed in a large case of plate glass, so any casual moving was out of the question. I made my way to the Curator's room where, after the usual greetings, I began to pull his leg.

"So the officials of this place do sometimes exert themselves a little," I suggested. "Every now and again an effort is made to justify the enormous sums extracted year by year from the rates."

"Why this cheap, rather musty wit, Doc.?" asked the Curator. "Believe me, your silly little contribution to municipal finance wouldn't"

"There! there!" I calmed him. "I just happened to notice that someone has been rearranging Neolithic Norah, so I naturally concluded that you had been doing a job of work."

To my surprise, the Curator instantly became highly interested.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Has she moved? Is her position altered?"

Before I had time to reply, he dashed out of the room, clattered down the stairs, and positively ran to the case. I followed more leisurely, to find him examining the case and its contents. He looked at it carefully from all sides, noting with practised and accustomed eye the position of each item in the exhibit, and pondered with special interest the marks in the sand. He made no comment, but when I approached the case,

he pointed to the skull.

As it lay on its side, that aspect of it which was usually hidden, was now clear to view, and I could see that the broad flat bone which forms the side wall of the dome of the skull had, at some time, been damaged. A closer examination showed that the injury must have been sustained during life, for there were signs, clear enough to anyone with a knowledge of pathology, that reformation of bone had taken place. In non-technical language, our lady must have had a terrific bang on the head, sufficiently heavy to crack the bone, but not severe enough to kill her. I remember thinking that such rough handling must have been almost part and parcel of one's everyday life, if one had lived in the Stone Age.

The Curator remained lost in thought for some minutes, then he turned and made his way slowly back to his sanctum, while I followed, without breaking-in on his silence: when we were back in his room, he said:

"Well, Doc., I'm very glad you happened to come in this evening, and I am even more glad that it was you, not me, who discovered Norah, as you call her. Believe me, this evening's happening has been of tremendous interest to me. For a very long time, seven years in fact, I have suspected the possibility of this, and I am only too pleased to have had my surmises confirmed, and by an independent observer. This is the second time this has happened, to my knowledge; probably it has happened many hundreds of times. It would seem that we, here in the Museum, have our own domestic spook—our family ghost, in fact.

"I have been in charge of this collection for some ten years, now, and naturally I have seen a fair number of changes, in fact I have made a good many myself. When I first came, this place was not so much an orderly exhibition of specimens as an odd-cum-short collection of local curiosities. Most of them were really good, you

understand, and many of them unique, so it seemed a thousand pities that more care had not been taken of them.

"I made up my mind, very early, that I would do my best to put things on a proper basis, so I tackled the Museum Committee of the Council. They behaved like trumps. It seems that my predecessor had taken very little interest in the Museum and the members of the Committee, were eager and anxious to put their house in order.

"Incredible as it may sound, we had ample funds, and the Committee set out to spend them. They did their work thoroughly and wisely—the internal arrangements of the building were overhauled, cases and cabinets reconditioned, and our collection subjected to careful and expert examination. Fortunately, I was able to get into touch with several friends of mine, whose knowledge, in their own spheres of interest, far surpasses my own, and they gave us the invaluable help of their ready assistance.

"The result of all this archaeological activity, to use a contradiction in terms, was to make the district museum-conscious, as it were. Our citizens began to sit up and take notice. They realised, many of them for the first time, that their own countryside had a history, a personality of its own, which, up to that time, had meant less than nothing to them. All kinds of unsuspected presentations were made, in fact they became so embarrassingly numerous that we had to call a halt.

After all, this place is primarily intended for the safeguarding of objects of real local interest or importance, so when retired colonels sent us crates of Hindoo godlings, stuffed but moulting tiger-heads and other relics of foreign service, we had to point out to them, as politely as we could, that the real and fitting resting place for their trophies was some big metropolitan centre.

"On the other hand, we welcomed little collections of local fauna and flora, obsolete but fascinating examples

of domestic arts and crafts, and all that kind of thing. One dear old soul, I remember, sent us three samplers, perfect gems, all worked with hearts and forget-me-nots, bless her! In short, we had our own little friendly, intimate Revival of Learning.

"But one day, I had rather a surprising interview with some Boy Scouts. They came here, to the Museum, and told an extraordinary story of tragedy on the Downs. They explained that they came to me, rather than go to the police, because they knew me and didn't know the local Inspector! Can you believe that rustic culture could rise to such heights? I felt so flattered that I blushed to the tips of my fingers.

"It seems that they had been prowling about, looking for flints, or wild flowers, or some other objects necessary for their organised Good Deed for the Museum and had failed to notice that it was getting late. Even a Scout can nod, it appears. The result was that dusk fell while they were still on the Downs, and they witnessed a most amazing scene. They told their story with that breathless haste that small boys use when excited, with many repetitions, but they seemed quite sure of their facts.

"They told me that they were searching a fold in the hills, when one of the Patrol, who had separated himself from the rest, came rushing back with a wild story about great monkeys. He had seen them, he said, fighting near a hole in a hillock. Now there are no holes in hillocks on the Downs, as the boys well knew, so they told him to shut up, and get on with the job. Besides—monkeys! Who ever heard of monkeys in that part of the world, except at Michaelmas Fair?

"But the lad stuck to his story, and managed to convince the rest that something unusual was happening, so the Patrol ceased to be naturalists, and became super scouts. They crept up the side of the fold in the direction indicated by their companion, and cautiously peered over the top.

"Yes, there straight in front of them, cut in the side of the hill, was a deep cave. On the ground in front of it lay a woman, simply dressed in rough, hairy skins. She seemed to be unconscious for she didn't move, and the boys noticed blood welling from a wound in her head.

"A short distance from her, two thick-set, savage-looking men were fighting tooth and nail. They hacked at one another with clumsy stone axes, they wrestled, they tore at each other's throats, they broke and clawed. After a while, they broke away from each other, sitting back on their haunches, their breath coming in laboured grunts, their hands clutching at their weapons. After a moment's respite, they dashed at each other again, while the woman, recovering her senses, propped herself up on her elbow, screaming defiance and encouragement.

"The second bout was short but decisive, for in a few moments, one of the combatants dealt his opponent a blow with his axe which apparently disabled one arm, for the wounded man shrieked, dropped his weapon, turned and fled down the slope. The victor stood for a moment in triumph, then he turned to the woman, lifted her up with rough tenderness, and carried her into the cave.

"This unlikely story the boys told me in snatches, with convincing little details here and there—the fact that the axes were made of stone, the high shrill pitch of the woman's shriek, and so on, enough to convince me, at any rate, that they were describing something they had actually witnessed. They knew exactly where they had seen all this, and would I come, please. 'Cause things didn't seem right?' Well, the light wasn't too good, but I thought I had better go and see if there was anything, so I sent one of the lads to fetch our local bobby and we hurried down the Downs.

"The boys easily guided us to the supposed scene of the battle, but when

we got there, we could find nothing at all, no cave in the hillside, no bloodshed, least of all any signs of people. The bobby was highly indignant, and stumped off muttering threats of summonses for hoaxing the police, and I must confess I felt rather small myself. I thought I was too old a bird to be caught like that!

"But the boys were so positive, swearing by every Scout Oath that they were innocent of all guile, that I had to believe they really had seen what they described. Out of sheer curiosity, I marked the spot, and returned to it next day.

"As I prowled round, I was conscious of an earnest desire to excavate this part of the Downs, so, after a few preliminary negotiations with the Squire, I had the place dug up. Yes, we found the cave all right, with Norah's skeleton inside, and her husband's, too.

"I haven't the faintest idea why she turns over from time to time, nor do I know why the Scouts were permitted to see this battle of a former epoch re-enacted. I suppose loves and hates were as strong three thousand years ago as they are now. Heigho! Doc. . . . Good night!"

CHAPTER V

CORN



"You might ask me—if you had thought of it," said the Curator one evening when we were settled in the cosy little dust-heaps he called his

sanctum: "You might ask me why we give house room to an exhibit so alien, in every sense of the term, to our Wessex."

He handed me a little case of box-wood containing, as I could see through the glass lid, an ounce or so of wheat. The grains were shrivelled and almost black, and they rattled in a dry harsh way against the sides of the box. Of course, wheat, *per se*, is anything but alien to Wessex, so I knew at once that the Curator was referring to some quality or attribute of this particular specimen.

There was nothing to the unaided eye, or intelligence for that matter, to distinguish this from any other sample of old useless wheat. The fact that it was old gave it some definite right to be in that room, and the very fact that it was there was ample proof that it was not useless, at any rate from a scientific point of view. I noticed that the grains were stuck together, that there was no indication of straw or chaff mixed with them. I handed the little case back to him, and waited for the story I felt sure would follow.

"Poor old George Stubbs gave us those," he said. "Do you remember him?"

As a matter of fact, I did, not that I knew the man well, but I had met him once or twice, to my unbounded pride. Most people, I venture to think, will remember his wonderful discoveries in Egypt, and the stir they made in archaeological circles. Possibly his name is better known to that very select few who are true Egyptologists, than it is to the popular world for, even in the zenith of his career, Stubbs loathed publicity, and in the latter years of his life he had so withdrawn himself from the world that even his own small circle hardly knew him, except as a great memory.

"Stubbs was a man who thoroughly believed in doing things for himself. He was what is generally called a practical man, which, alas! too often means a

man who is practically always a nuisance. He was not content to examine and compare the discoveries and findings of other people, nor would he be convinced by the written word. He had to go and do things himself, see the actual site of discovery, personally organise and control the gangs of fellahin diggers, and so forth.

"All very proper and workman-like, you will say, the true self-sacrificing spirit of scientific research, and so on, and I should have no objection ready to offer you, if the old chap had been content to trot about on his own. Then he could have endangered his life and well-being how and when he liked, and, if he had broken down, no one would grieve unduly, except perhaps the Learned Societies. I have no doubt that their sorrow would be a generous expression of grief at the loss of an eminent colleague, but it would have been quite impersonal.

"But he never did travel alone. Wherever he went, whatever expedition he led or accompanied, his only son went with him, an extraordinarily pleasant young fellow, courteous, reliable, and as keen as he could possibly be. The work his father was doing became a kind of cult to him.

"He felt in some deep convincing way that the old Egyptians, in making their elaborate preparations for their funereal rites, and ensuring in every way known to them that their tombs should remain inviolate, were doing it for our benefit. That they might conceivably be taking all this trouble to ensure their own happy hereafter simply didn't occur to him. No, as he regarded it, the archaeologist was fortunate in that a cult had developed among these interesting people which ensured the preservation of so many beautiful and interesting relics.

"He was, in every sense, a realist. He was, naturally enough, well versed in the complex lore of Egyptian mythology, he could and did appreciate its great lessons of Judgment and Im-

mortality, but these lessons were simply folk-lore to him. Folk-lore of a very high character, folk-lore so exalted that it pointed to intelligence of an outstanding order, but certainly nothing more significant than the picturesque myths of a people long passed.

"Father and son used to disappear for months on end. It was known that they were exploring somewhere in Lybia, but they managed to keep the secret of their exact location to themselves. The rivalry which existed at one time between men of learning, especially if their chosen field of research called for extensive travel, would have put the Capulets and their friends to shame! So eager were they to gather to themselves the kudos for bringing to light the glories of days gone by, that they shrouded their movements in a veil that would have done credit to the most cunning camouflage expert.

"So you will understand that I can't tell you where they made their great find, because I simply don't know. All I know, in common with all the experts, is that they returned to this country, after one of their expeditions, with some marvellous specimens. I don't mean to imply that they brought back treasures in the sense that recent excavators have done, that is to say their finds didn't include much that was intrinsically valuable, but from the point of view of pure archaeology, they were simply beyond valuation.

"More particularly, they discovered fragments of papyri which increased our comprehension of the Book of the Dead. In point of number and size, these fragments were not remarkable, but they filled in gaps in our knowledge. The most important of these fragments, they found in a tomb many miles into the Lybian Desert—when I say that I am speaking rather loosely—which some person had used for burial purposes.

"No actual human remains were found, but some interesting pieces of

funeral furniture were unearthed. They found, among other things, part of the sledge used to convey the mummy to its resting place, a few 'ush-abti' figures, and a little sealed jar of beautiful blue clay. Near it were some of the papyrus fragments I mentioned, which, so far as could be deciphered, seemed to indicate that the tomb contained the hidden symbols of resurrection, if the finder could understand them.

"Father and son discovered little that was new to them, except the sealed jar. This was rather outside their experience. On examination, it was found to contain a wax-like substance, in which were embedded many grains of wheat. Offerings of food, spices and the like were, of course, common enough, but the special care taken to preserve these grains was unusual. After some hesitation, they decided to plant a few.

"Opinions differ, I know, as to whether it is possible for any spark of life to persist throughout the centuries that such mummy wheat must have lain hidden in the tomb. Some, indeed most, experts tell us that any possibility of vegetable life surviving is absolutely out of the question. Others, however, affirm that they have themselves seen corn grown from grains taken from sarcophagi under their very eyes. Ah! yes, retorts the former school of thought, but you were imposed upon by some cunning dragoman, and so the dispute lingers on.

"After they had been home some time and had settled down to the classification of their find, the Stubbs decided to make the experiment for themselves. Here, they said, was genuine, entombed mummy wheat—will it grow? They planted some, taking care to reproduce as nearly as they could, the soil of the desert, and set the pot in the greenhouse.

"For months nothing happened, and then the tragedy occurred which eclipsed all interest in such things. The son, that splendid young fellow from

whom so much was expected, was killed by some half-witted road-hog on a motor-cycle. Just wiped out, his keen brain and charming personality obliterated, because some lout wanted to boast that he had done 77 m.p.h. on his new . . . whatever the damn thing was.

"Poor old Stubbs was just dazed. His mind must have slipped a cog or two, I fancy, for his entire life changed. He was so wrapped up in the boy, that it seemed that more than half his own life and energy followed his son, to the grave. He just pottered about, wandering from room to room, touching with pathetic little caresses the finds they had made together with such enthusiasm, and then recoiling from them as though they were responsible for his loss. His former appreciation of the beauty and art of his life work slipped from him, and he became listless and apathetic.

"Towards the end of the second spring, he asked me to go to see him. In fact, he said, that he would like to renew old contacts, and try, in a kind of re-awakening of interests, to fill in his now empty life. I went, but I found him even more changed than I had feared. I'm glad to remember, however, that after the first few days, he seemed to pull himself together. He became rather more tranquil, he would talk with interested animation of his discoveries, and speculate with real anticipation as to how they would influence contemporary ideas.

"One evening, as we were sitting talking after dinner, he suddenly said: 'By George! I wonder how that wheat is doing!' Then he sank back into his chair, his head buried in his hands and I heard him muttering: 'Poor, poor lad! How interested he was in our little test! And I had forgotten all about it! I don't even know if the pots are still in the greenhouse. Come with me, my friend, and we'll look now.' 'You go in front,' I said. 'Let the discovery, if any, be your own.'

"He looked at me with a wistful gratitude that made me glad that I had thought to say this, and went through into the greenhouse. I remained in the dining-room, to give the old chap time to look round, but in a moment I sprang to my feet. I heard a kind of long sigh, a drawing of the breath in wonder and delight, followed by the sound of a falling body.

"I ran to the greenhouse, but I was checked at the door by a wondrous sight. On the floor lay poor old Stubbs, quite, quite still. On the staging of the house stood a large flower-pot from which grew many stalks of wheat, which riveted my attention to the exclusion of everything else. Tall, slim and graceful they stood, their heads bowed towards the earth.

"Above them, supported as it were by their fragile stems, was a mighty being. Swathed in gleaming white bands, his head crowned with the royal ureus, looking with calm serenity into limitless space, was a majestic figure whom even I recognised. It did not need the dread insignia of flail and looped cross to make me realise that, for an instant of time, I was gazing at Osiris, Great Judge of the Dead, the Lord of Life to Come."

CHAPTER VI

STONE



ONE evening, when I went into the Museum, I was conscious of an atmosphere about the place to which I was unaccustomed. Probably most of us have noticed that a house or building, any spot in fact in which men live and work has distinct moods of its own. One is conscious of course of the busy air of the factory, in the same way that

one can be aware of the calm peace of an old abbey, but I don't mean that at all.

In all probability, that is simply association of ideas. One expects to receive a certain impression in harmony with one's surroundings, and in the vast majority of cases, one does get that very impression. I have no doubt that in many instances it is a kind of mild self-hypnosis, or auto-suggestion. But that isn't the idea I want to convey.

On this particular evening I could sense, as it were, a quality in the whole "feel" of the Museum that was different. I make no claim whatever to being what is commonly called psychic. I am not, as a rule, affected by outside influences to the extent that some folk claim to be, but this evening, as I said, the Museum in some subtle way seemed to be changed. One felt as though one wanted to tread softly, hat in hand, as if in the presence of some deep and beautiful mystery.

When I entered the Curator's little room, I found him, too, rather more subdued than is customary. His welcome was every bit as cheerful as usual and the ritual cigarettes were as freely offered, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness which I hardly associated with him. After a few moments of exchanging trivialities, I said:

"What's come over this place to-day? I'm accustomed to a certain amount of gravity—a museum is never exactly noisy—but to-day there is air of reverential awe brooding over the building that makes me feel as though I were in church."

"So you've got it, too, have you?" he asked, looking at me under lowered brows. "You've noticed that feeling of other—I nearly said higher—worldliness? I wonder if—— Yes, I'm sure it must be connected with our latest acquisition. Look at this."

As he spoke he got up and unlocked the little safe in which specially valuable pieces are sometimes kept. He

took out from it a casket, which he placed on the table.

"If my conjectures are right," he said. "If I am not thinking vain thoughts, the proper place for this is the Tower, or, better still, Canterbury Cathedral."

I looked at the casket with interest. It was not very big, about $9 \times 6 \times 6$ inches, and was made of some dark wood, inlaid with rough silver, and on the lid was a knot or handle that seemed to be made of agate. It was handsome, but not particularly striking.

He opened it, and took from it something wrapped in white silk, which he carefully unfolded, revealing a round piece of stone. I bent over to examine it more closely, when I saw that it was a nearly spherical piece of turquoise matrix. It was about as big as a closed fist and while the bulk of it was glossy black, broad veins of beautiful sky blue ran through it. A square hole pierced one side of it, going back nearly to the heart of the stone.

"This was given to us only the other day," said the Curator, "by a lady. She told me that she had picked it up by the side of a lake somewhere here in the West, but she seemed rather hazy as to the exact part. I rather gather that it was Cornwall somewhere, but even to-day, in spite of manifold aids to accuracy, people are lamentably vague as to the exact location of their finds.

"But in this instance, the exact spot is not of the first importance, in spite of the fact that I believe this to be the only thing of its kind in existence. You may say that such an attitude of mind is unworthy of the true scientific observer, but in this case I am more concerned with the wonderful possibility of this being in existence at all, than I am with any petitifogging details of the circumstance that gave rise to this discovery. In short, a pleasantly reprehensible frame of mind!"

"The lady, who found it, and, not unnaturally, kept it, didn't know that she

might be infringing the law of treasure trove, because one doesn't expect to find large pieces of turquoise near English lakes. She thought it was the porcelain top of an umbrella handle, despite its size! She was attracted by its colouring, and took it home—to her enormous benefit.

"She told me a pathetic life story in considerable detail. Briefly summarised it amounted to one misfortune after another. Her parents, after a life of fair middle-class comfort, had lost everything through over-confidence in unscrupulous financiers, had been saved from the workhouse only by death. She herself eked out a drab existence by teaching and writing little stories. Her only brother was striving to make ends meet somewhere, I think, in Australia.

"In fact, as gloomy a little picture as one could hope not to find. But she told me, from the time she found this stone, everything changed for the better. I don't mean that the heavens opened and showered riches on her, or anything improbable like that, but as she herself put it, 'everything seemed to go right.'

"To begin with, her employers recognised her merits, and raised her salary, her little stories sold better, and, best of all, her brother made an entirely unexpected land deal, which netted him a very comfortable profit, so that he came home to her. All very commonplace, but eminently satisfactory for her, and all dating from the chance finding of the stone.

"But now for the real story—all this is incidental, though importantly so. She told me that one day she was walking through a wood, when she heard a horse coming towards her. This rather surprised her, as she knew of no one in the district who would attempt to ride through the thick undergrowth that grew between the trees. She knew that it was not a stray beast, for she could hear the voice of a man humming a gay little tune, and the sound of metallic jingling.

"She stopped to listen, partly from curiosity, but more because she was charmed, in some inexplicable way, by the air of the song; so there she stood, surprised and vaguely elated by some emotion she couldn't define. Then she saw, quite clearly and vividly, riding towards her a knight in armour. She is entirely ignorant of the technical details of arms and armour, so she couldn't describe him, or give me any clear account of him, except for two points.

"The first was that his helmet supported a great crest, shaped like a golden dragon, and at his side hung a great sword, the pommel of which was made of a big blue-black stone. She watched him ride by, and then perceived that he seemed to ride through the undergrowth, not over or round it. The great horse and his rider did not disturb the grass or the flowers nor did the undergrowth impede them at all.

"Moving impressively in a straight line, they came through everything that was before them, disturbing nothing, silent, save for the song and the faint silvery ring of metal. As the great horse drew near her, the rider turned, raising his mailed hand in salute, and smiled at her. She says that every kind and courteous thought and emotion was expressed in that smile.

"She felt happy, uplifted, and in some way she is quite unable to describe, safe. That was her predominating thought, that she was secure from any misfortunes that might visit her, that between her and a harsh world would always be that sword and that dragon crest. As she gazed at this majestic vision, it turned away, and moved into the trees, and was gone. She remained standing there, wondering what it all meant, but convinced that she had glimpsed something not of this world, something that was high, noble and infinitely tender.

She returned to her home, and then she realised that the stone she had found was the same as that which formed the pommel of the knight's

sword, and she felt impelled to place it in safe keeping. She brought it to me, and I locked it up as you see. To repeat what I said a short while ago, this must go to some national shrine, for I am convinced that the knight was Arthur and that this piece of turquoise is the pommel of Excalibur."

CHAPTER VII

THE STAIR



"You may remember," said the Curator, one evening, "that I once told you a story in which I figured as a kind of makee-learnee Sherlock Holmes. You do? Well, this little piece of metal was the indirect cause of my figuring, in some small measure, in another episode, but this time in a rather different capacity. What that capacity was, exactly, I don't really know, even now. The nearest definition I can think of is something contradictory, 'Antiquarian Dustman' might do—except that all antiquarians are dustmen of a sort. 'Psychic detective' could do, except that it is altogether too grand, and doesn't account for things a bit. What I'm trying to explain is the beginning of a very unpleasant affair, in which I was involved, and this piece of metal is part of the evidence."

While he had been talking, I had been examining the specimen he showed me. It was, so far as I could see, a small cylindrical piece of metal, about four inches long. To all external appearance, it was a most ordinary bit of scrap iron, but, as I have had occasion to remark before, appearances are very deceptive in the Museum. The Curator took it from me, and weighed it in his hand, lost for a moment in thought.

"Like so many of our specimens, if only it could speak, this bit of iron might tell us of many a scene of bloodshed and horror. It was rather a melancholy reflection on mankind, that old Shakespeare summed up when he said that 'the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones,' but it's true, none the less, or at any rate, the vast majority of people think so. They are quite ready to believe that any tale of murder and horror must be true, and then cast sceptical glances at tales of miracles. Why this should be, I can't explain . . . and I won't start moralising!"

"This bit of iron has seen its tragedies, I'll warrant, and one very nearly came into my own experience. I'll tell you, whether you believe it or not is beside the point. I can't change facts, recent or remote, simply because they don't square with people's preconceived ideas.

"This affair began a few years ago, when two old friends of mine, a man and his wife, came to see me here at the Museum. I hadn't come across them for some years, and knew very little about their more recent movements, except that they had been travelling rather extensively.

"They told me, over a little reunion dinner we arranged, that they had found a place in the country, not very far from here, which exactly fitted their notion of what a country place should be. It had been standing empty for some years, but seemed to be in good repair, and needing very little modernising. I rather shied when I heard that word! I had awful visions of the Priest's Hide being turned into a linen cupboard and the Tiltyard flooded for water polo.

"Oh, yes! This house had both Hide and Tiltyard, and several other desirable things as well. My fears proved groundless, however, for the modernising they had in view was directed chiefly in the direction of lighting and sanitation. They sang its

praises at length—its hall, its big rooms, its tall windows, but above all else they talked of its staircase.

"Here was a noble structure, they said, wide, with broad shallow steps, sweeping round the hall in a pleasing curve, guarded by thick fluted balusters and panelled on the wall side with oak, so dark as to be almost black. At the head of the stairs was a window of stained glass, which threw patches of rich colour on to the wood. I suggested that they might find it a bit sombre, and was laughed at for my own gloom.

"They took possession and moved in, and they rather faded from my thoughts until I received a friendly little note, chaffing me for my forgetfulness, and asking me to visit them as soon as I could. It so happened that I could get away almost at once, so I went down. I found the house to be every bit as charming as they had said, more so if anything, because the spoken description doesn't give a quarter of the detail that the visual impression can give. They took a childlike delight in showing me its charms, and I could heartily congratulate them on their luck.

"It was on my second morning there that I first met the strange man. I was pottering round the garden when I turned the corner of a yew hedge, and nearly bumped into him. This was surprising in itself, but the man's appearance was even more unusual.

"He was a squat, thick-set, ungainly fellow, with a pale, flat-looking face, surmounted by a thatch of red hair, topped with a broad-brimmed hat. His clothes were tight-fitting, rusty greenish-black, but they didn't belong to the present day at all. He looked more like a Crookshank illustration to a Harrison Ainsworth novel than he did to an outdoor servant, and, to complete the illusion, he carried a bunch of keys. I put him down as a gardener or the like, and passed the time of day with him, but he only growled a surly 'G'day' and moved on. I finished my

stroll and returned to the house.

"'I don't think much of your outdoor staff,' I said to my host at lunch.

"'Neither do I,' he answered. 'We haven't got one!'

"'I mean the gardener, or handyman or whatnot that I met in the garden near the yew hedge,' I answered.

"He looked at his wife in surprise, then he said to me: 'I can only think you must have met a tramp. One moment!' He rang the bell, and when the parlour-maid came in, asked her if any strange man had been hanging round the house that morning.

"'Oh, no, sir,' she replied. 'The only men we've 'ad up 'ere to-day was two errand boys [sniff] and there wasn't no one in the garden 'cause I was 'anging out the tea-cloths. I'der seen 'im. Besides, I'der packed him off,' [sniff] [sniff] and the female Cerberus flounced out.

"We thought no more about it, and occupied ourselves in the delightful, lazy way one does in the country on holiday. I remember we listened to a very amusing revue on the wireless, and sat chatting for some little while after. The lady left us two men to finish our drinks at about eleven o'clock and started upstairs.

"Almost at once we heard a crash—well, it was hardly a crash so much as a smashing blow—followed immediately by a piercing scream which rang through the house. We gazed at one another for an instant, and then dashed into the hall. The bright lights showed us the lady, cowering against the wall of the stairs, and we caught a glimpse of the figure of a man disappearing round a bend in the corridor. We rushed up the stairs, asking the usual jumbled questions.

"She simply pointed to the wall on the opposite side of the staircase, and there we saw a short spear or javelin quivering in the wood. Our first thought was for the lady, and we got her back to the dining-room. She satisfied us that she was not hurt, but

she was too frightened to give us a very connected story.

"We gathered, however, from her disjointed words, that as she was walking up the stairs, she felt one tread tilt forward under her weight. At the same time there was a sharp sound in the wall by her head, and she heard something fly over her. She instinctively crouched at the moment of hearing the noise, which undoubtedly saved her life.

"As she lay on the floor she saw for a moment the figure of a man leaning over the rails, and heard the jingling of the keys. We fetched electric torches and examined the staircase tread by tread; about half-way up we found one which did in fact tilt forward, and at the same time, one of the boards of the panelling dropped in a slotted groove. This revealed a narrow cavity going back into the wall for about a yard. At the end of this cavity we could see some thin, rusty chains, but we didn't feel inclined to do more that night, beyond making sure that no stranger was in the house.

"The following morning, helped by a local builder, we dismantled that part of the stairway, and we found below it a simple catch or bolt, of which this piece of metal is an important part. When the tread of the stair moved, it released a weight attached to the chains, which then acted like a bow-string, that is to say, when they were suddenly stretched taut by the falling weight, they projected the javelin through the hole in the panelling. In short, it was a primitive, but efficient and very deadly booby trap.

"Doubtless it had proved most useful to early defenders of the house in stair fights during raids. We found that the essential keeper bolt, that is the one in the stairs, was almost eaten through with rust, and was liable, on the slightest jar, to release the mechanism. I fancy the figure we saw was the erstwhile custodian of this device, who had returned to his former charge to watch it take one more victim."

CHAPTER VIII

CREPE



STIMULATED perhaps by some of the stories the Curator had told me, I found myself taking rather more interest in our forbears and their relics than I had done heretofore. I began to take notice of the small treasures other people showed to me, to a degree which, up to that time, was quite foreign to my usual taste. I began to see that the most commonplace, everyday objects might have a story to tell, or even a lesson to teach.

It may reasonably be asked why this interest had laid dormant for so many years, and the only answer I can suggest in self-defence, is that my work, and the training for it had taught me to be interested in people rather than things, in living man rather than his dead artifacts. But now, as I said, I found myself taking an altogether wider view. I found that the uncountable relics left to us carried a store of most stimulating interest of their own. If I didn't exactly find sermons in stones, I certainly found food for thought in everything. A receptive but, I trust, not unduly credulous frame of mind!

The result was that the Museum now had for me charms to which I had been lamentably blind, and spoke to me in a voice I was now hearing for the first time, urging me to remember that this generation is but the most recent of untold thousands. We moderns, priding ourselves on our up-to-dateness, are too frequently forgetful of the fact that, but for the past, there would be no present.

As I mounted the stairs to the Curator's room, I hoped that he would have something to show me, and I was not disappointed. When we were settled

in front of the fire, he handed me what I took to be a crude ink design, but which proved to be an irregular piece of cloth, mounted between two sheets of glass. There was no indication as to what it might be. It had no definite shape, nor was there any difference to be noticed on either side of it. I was unable, of course, to determine its structure by the sense of touch, but it looked as if it might be heavy silk. I waited for the story.

"This came from a sleepy little town called Donningbury, on the road from London to Bath," he began, "and was given to me by a retired bank manager, a most level-headed, wide-awake fellow, who had all the acumen and common sense necessary in one of his profession. He was not a man easily deceived by appearances, nor did the bare unsupported word impress him at all, which tends to make his story all the more probable.

"This adventure of his happened many years ago, when he was cashier to a branch of his bank which numbered many of the local bigwigs among its customers. In the more leisureed, less hectic days before the War, business was sometimes done with rather less red tape than it is now, and if some of the rather crotchety old customers liked a little bit of special attention—well, they got it.

"There was one old trout, about five miles out (sorry! I didn't mean to begin a nursery rhyme!) where was I?—oh! yes—an old lady who lived about five miles from this town occasionally demanded that a bank official should wait on her to discuss various high matters of finance. Generally the manager went himself, but on this occasion the command came when he was away, so my friend went in his place, for the first time.

"He was told that the ritual was always the same—the official dined alone, and was then conducted to her ladyship. He would drink a solemn glass of port with her, discussing

current society scandal, and then get down to business. The whole thing would probably occupy most of the evening.

"On this occasion, he set out and reached her house in good time; he was received like an ambassador, and given a first-class meal. After dinner, he was sitting in front of the fire, waiting to be summoned into the Presence, when, without any warning, the door was flung open and a man walked into the room. He nodded in an off-hand way to our friend, and walked over to the bookcase, where he proceeded to take down volume after volume, hurriedly turning the pages, and replacing them on the shelves.

"While he was thus occupied, our friend took stock of him, and was not very pleased with the appearance of his taciturn companion. Although it was past dinner-time, the man was still dressed in riding kit of a rather old-fashioned cut, and seemed to have neglected to brush himself, nor was his high white stock any too clean. This was the more noticeable because he held his head on one side, as though he had a stiff neck. His face was coarse and of a high colour, and his close-cropped dark hair was grey at the temples.

"He continued his search among the books until he took down a heavy calf-bound volume, from inside the cover of which he triumphantly extracted a folded piece of black material. He turned to our friend in great glee.

"'I've been looking for this for many a long day,' he said. 'I was certain it was stowed away in this place somewhere. This has stood me in good stead many a time and oft. Devilish glad to have it again—feel more complete now.' As he said this, he folded it up, put it in his tail-pocket, and sat down.

"'D'ye know this part at all?' he asked. 'You don't? Well, well! I suppose I know the roads round here like the palm of my own hand. Time and

again I've ridden along 'em on my business, but I've retired now—oh, yes—I've been retired some years now. But I enjoyed the work while I was at it. There's a charm about riding the roads in the dusk of the day that never palls—no, it never palls.

"Sometimes times were good, sometimes bad. Days when I didn't make the price of the nag's food, others when I turned a pretty penny. But it was always good, while it lasted. The sunlight fading from the sky, the purple twilight falling, the scent of the hay-fields under the moon, the hoot of an owl and the scurry of rabbits. Then the wait in the quiet dark, the lights of an approaching carriage, the foolish confusion of the coachman when I stopped him. . . ."

"By this time, our friend was quite at sea. He had supposed the man to be a steward or bailiff come in to look up some accounts, but that notion didn't square with his present attitude. Then he fancied that he might be some eccentric occupant of the house, too vague in his conduct to be entrusted with any business affairs, for no male relative of the old lady had ever been mentioned. . . .

"Yes, he decided, that must be the explanation—some weak-minded member of the family, kept discreetly in

the background. Well, it was no affair of his, and the chap didn't seem violent. To convince himself that he was quite at ease, he glanced round the room, taking stock of the rather dingy appointments, when he heard a faint sound behind him.

"He turned round and saw that the man, still gazing at the piece of material which he had dragged from his pocket, was tugging at his crumpled neckerchief. He loosened it a little, when our friend saw that he had an angry bluish-green weal on his neck. He was about to comment on it when the man turned without a word, and strode from the room, but our friend noticed that he had left his find on the table. And then he realised with something of a shock that the door was shut, and had never been opened!

"Somewhat agitated, he picked up the book and scanned a few pages, when it proved to be a rather rambling local history of Georgian times. He found that it opened readily at the place where the piece of crepe had been pressed, obviously for years, and he read of the life and activities of one Robert Naylor, a notorious highwayman who had been gibbeted in what must have been the gardens of that very house.

"The bit of crepe was his mask."



Revanoff's Fantasia

*The House Haunted by
a Ghostly Melody*

By HENRY RAWLE



IT was when I was very young that I first heard the melody which was to have such a strange significance for me in later years. I remember now the uncanny sense of rapture and pathos but above all of recognition which came to me as I listened to its sweet refrain. I recall too the perplexity in my father's expression as he noticed the tears, of ecstasy, of wistfulness, of sympathy, I knew not what which crept into my eyes and would not be denied. That was many years ago and though I have heard it often since, with hardly less emotion, never will I forget my first introduction to the "Fantasia Pathetic."

I heard it once when I lay very ill with a dread disease; it came drifting up to me from some remote part of the hospital like a whisper from a distant world. Eagerly I listened until the last haunting strains had died away into silence. I can never persuade myself that it had no influence upon my recovery.

I heard it again in France when we were marching through a shell-racked village, too tired even to sing. It tinkled forlornly from an ancient piano as we plodded past a half-demolished cottage.

My heart stood still as I recognised the trembling melody and not until we were far down the village street and the burden could be heard no longer did I breathe again.

It was in fact during the War that I became acquainted with Wally Elman, although it was not until the War was over and we returned to England that I had the opportunity to discover that my new-found friend was one of the finest pianists I ever heard. As is often the case with men of genius he was quite unaware of anything remarkable about himself; in fact his indifference to compliments was at times almost disconcerting. Often I would visit him and it was seldom indeed that I was not successful in persuading him to play for me. For hours I would listen to his interpretation of classic after classic. I never tired of the endless harmony.

Once I had asked him if he could play the "Fantasia Pathetic." The response I will never forget. Smiling, he had nodded and then softly, tenderly there had fallen from the glistening keys the first gentle awakening of harmony, the tranquil opening chords of that plaintive melody.

Like a man entranced I listened. It

was as though I had never heard this piece before; as though I was listening to it for the first time in my life. And again those strange unaccountable tears came to my eyes as the wistful strains sang and swelled into a maelstrom of beauty. It swirled and whispered and murmured and sang.

It was then that a peculiar thing happened to me. You may like to call it imagination, illusion; call it what you will. I only know that as the melody rang out I closed my eyes in sheer rapture and there before me was a mental picture, a vision incredibly life-like yet with the misty vagueness of some half-forgotten dream.

Dimly I could see a ballroom gay with the colourful dresses of smiling women intermingling with the blue and scarlet uniforms of their escorts. Everywhere there were flowers and the place was alive with music and laughter.

There was one woman in a gown of palest blue who surpassed all others in her slender youth; beautiful as a rose she was, tall and stately, with the visage of a queen. And there is a young man, fair and straight as any soldier, though he wears no uniform . . . all the evening his eyes never stray from her radiant face, but he never approaches her. Not until the last waltz does he find courage. They dance together, smiling . . . and here the melody breaks through.

Like movements on a shadowy stage the scene changes . . . there is a little chapel with the sun filtering through the stained-glass windows and an organ plays, softly. These two are here, though now the gown of palest blue is replaced by one of virgin white; its silken folds drape gracefully about her as she walks arm in arm with the fair young man . . . they whisper and smile together and then the bells peal out . . . and here the melody breaks through, radiant and joyful.

The vision fades and now—what is this? It is evening in a tiny church-

yard . . . a silent figure stands by a new grave; his fair head droops on his chest . . . he is young still, but smiling no longer and his eyes never leave the marble headstone . . . but now the light grows dim and I can see no more. And here the melody breaks through again, unforgettable in its tender yearning; more delicate and sweet than the scent of lilac in summer, more appealing in its supplication than a pilgrim in prayer.

Now, as the melody mourns on dimly I see a lonely figure seated at a piano, his hair straggling forlornly across his forehead as he plays . . .

And the lovely melody is dying and yet it lingers on haunting, elusive, reluctant to die; and the vision is gone and I am listening to the last throbbing chords as they tremble away into silence. I am suddenly back again and it is Wally after all who is playing the piano in his own little room. And only the memory of a fragrant dream remains. . . .

MYSTERIOUS FORCES



Many years later I had another encounter with the mysterious forces which in some unseen way had so surely linked my life with the "Fantasia Pathetic." It was in Belgium in a little village near the German frontier that I had an experience which I can only describe as uncanny; it was weird in the extreme yet I knew it was but another sign of the peculiar connection which had always existed between myself and this unique composition.

I had gone to Belgium for a brief holiday and this day I had wandered far from the place where I was staying with the object of exploring some of the surrounding countryside. I found myself walking down a typical Belgium

country lane, not greatly differing from ours here in England.

As I walked I became aware of an altogether unreal sense of familiarity with my surroundings although I knew I had never in my life been within two hundred miles of this place. The feeling increased as I went along and now it seemed that I was beginning to recognise certain landmarks; here a singular formation of trees, there a wayside water-mill with its picturesque setting.

Now I came to the outskirts of the village which I have mentioned; instinctively I took a road which led me over an old stone bridge and then curved round to run parallel with a deep, placid river until at last it turned right and I found myself in the village street.

Now there was no doubt in my mind that at some time, somehow, if not in this life then in some other existence, I had been here before! Like a man in a dream I wandered slowly past an ancient inn; I knew before I looked at the signboard that it was called the "Red Dwarf." But what was this? The "Rampant Ox."

Could I be mistaken? Was it after all only an illusion, a coincidence? With some trepidation I approached one of the few villagers to be seen; he was a very old man and was seated outside, at a bench.

"Tell me," I said, making use of the little French I had picked up during the war, "did not this inn used to be called the 'Red Dwarf'?"

He gazed at me queerly for a moment then:

"Yes, in my father's time when he was a boy it was known by that name. Feodor Revanoff used often to visit it. But that was many years ago—long before I was born. . . ."

I wandered on like a man entranced. Soon I knew I would come to a place where there was a well and three roads met. Then I would take the middle road and not far down I would turn off to the left through a grove of trees and

there I would find a house which I knew well. . . .

I came to the crossroads and the well; I took the middle road; soon I came to the avenue where the trees joined hands high above and the sun filtered through the canopy of green foliage. Here I found the mansion which I knew well. . . .

It seemed that after an interminable period of absence I had returned to a place which was my home. The handsome house was incredibly dilapidated; the place exuded an atmosphere of melancholy and neglect. It was surrounded by a garden which once had been beautiful but which had now become a waste of utter desolation rank with weeds and long grass.

I made my way up to the door which lay in the centre of the pillared front.

In response to my insistent manipulations of a rusted bell knob a faint jangling could be heard floating up from some remote part of the building and soon the door swung back creaking and groaning as though in protest at this unwarranted disturbance. From the gloom of the interior an old man peered out in furtive apprehension.

"What is it?" he began. "Visitors are only allowed . . ."

As he caught sight of my face the words died on his lips and he shrank back, his ashen face twitching horribly.

"Feodor Revanoff!" he croaked, "Feodor Revanoff! After all these years. . . ."

Impatiently I brushed past him and made my way up the bare rickety staircase; the walls were damp and discoloured with age. As I ascended I was distantly aware that the old man was watching me with dilated eyes and mumbling incoherently to himself.

Now I found myself upon a gallery which overlooked the shadowy hall; and now, almost imperceptibly at first, there forced itself upon my consciousness a strange murmuring, low and subdued, like the rustling of phantasmal leaves or the sighing of a distant wind.

Slowly it resolved itself into a semblance of music, whispering, vague and weirdly elusive.

It seemed at first to come from a door on my left; it was unlocked and slightly ajar. I entered the room; it was empty. Nothing but dust and cobwebs and the floorboards were rotted with great gaping holes; and the wind came in in sharp gusts through the broken window-panes. Outside again that fantastic music swirled and hovered, formless and unaccountable. Farther along I found another room, empty as the first except for this ghostly cantata.

Everywhere, now, I could hear that music. It was unearthly; it was nowhere and it was everywhere. Restlessly I wandered about that gloomy house; tirelessly, up the stairs and down again, along the endless corridors, into the countless rooms, rooms with unlocked doors, searching relentlessly—searching for what?

Then there came to me as though from afar the vague insinuation that I was searching for the source of this mysterious music; then the inner conviction that I must find it.

As I stalked about that desolate house the tempo strengthened until at last there came a faint awakening of recognition. Surely I knew that sweet, haunting refrain . . . could it be . . . yes, how could I be mistaken? It was the "Fantasia Pathetic." . . .

HOSTLY MELODY



Its familiar air now swelled into a softly murmuring whirlpool of exquisite melody, filling the house with vibrant, echoing

sound, strangely restless, infinitely wistful. Now, like some distant mountain waterfall the superb rhapsody went tumbling, dancing and leaping in a wild cascade of harmony falling into abyssal depths below where, indignant, it rumbled and gurgled as though resentful at its downfall.

Plaintive and subdued, its uncanny beauty was unfathomable. The ghostly symphony swept on, throbbing, pulsing, beautifully alive, tenderly reminiscent of springtime and the freshness of youth and yet so strangely, inexplicably sad, as though for ever seeking for some lost illusion.

And all the while so puzzling in the fantastic elusiveness of its source. It was disembodied; it was omnipotent; it was as though this melody belonged to this house, as though for countless ages it had dwelt in its drear confines and become part of it. But now its burden came slower, less distinct, less and less audible until finally, with a last reluctant sigh it died away into silence.

A silence which was more awful than that mysterious music in its contrast; a silence which was charged with a furtive dread, full of an unknown menace. A stillness, deathlike, permeated everything.

Sudden fear, rampant and uncontrollable, clutched at me with talons of ice; my one fervent desire was to get out of this dreadful house as quickly as possible. But my feet had become as though weighted with lead; my footsteps restrained by some fiendish, invisible hand like one in the throes of some grim nightmare.

With a strength born of despair I struggled on, down the stairs, and at last with indescribable relief I burst out into the open air again. One last look round I gave as I hastened down the ill-defined pathway; in that fleeting glimpse I caught sight of a simple bronze plaque beside the door almost overgrown with ivy. It read—

'Here lived and died
Feodor Revanoff
1795-1827'

A quick, involuntary shudder ran through me as I hurried down the path and out into the lane again.

Once past the crossroads and back in the village the peculiar sense of unnaturalness which had pursued me for so long vanished and I was myself again. Only perplexity remained; I decided to make some discreet enquiries about the lonely house in the lane. The inn, I decided, would be the best place; so there I went.

The tap-room of the "Rampant Ox" I found to be both inviting and picturesque. It was low-ceilinged and timbered with black oak; a varied collection of relics and curios, some in glass cases, betrayed the landlord's antiquarian soul.

Here, seated at a table with two or three equally ancient associates was my informant of a few hours earlier. I greeted him cordially and after ordering drinks for all drew up a chair and made myself sociable. Presently, the talk taking a favourable turn, I reverted to our conversation of the morning.

"You mentioned," I said as casually as possible, "a certain Feodor Revanoff; he lived in these parts, didn't he?"

"Yes," he responded, "he lived in the chateau. People come from all over the world to visit the place where Feodor Revanoff wrote some of his greatest music. . . ."

"Ah," I said, "so it is open to visitors then, this house?"

"Yes," interjected another, who turned out to be the school-teacher, "but only on certain days in the week. Old Jaques is the custodian . . . his father was manservant to Revanoff himself before his ill-fated marriage to the beautiful Rosa la Vare. A tragic affair that . . . but of course it is past history; it would doubtless be of little

interest to Monsieur. . . ."

"I am not so sure of that," I murmured; then, "Tell me about it my friend."

"Well," resumed the other, "as I said, it is a sad story, but one that does not take long in the telling. Feodor Revanoff was one of the foremost composers of his time though now he is almost unknown, owing no doubt to the fact that his output was so small. He was born in Russia though he spent most of his life here.

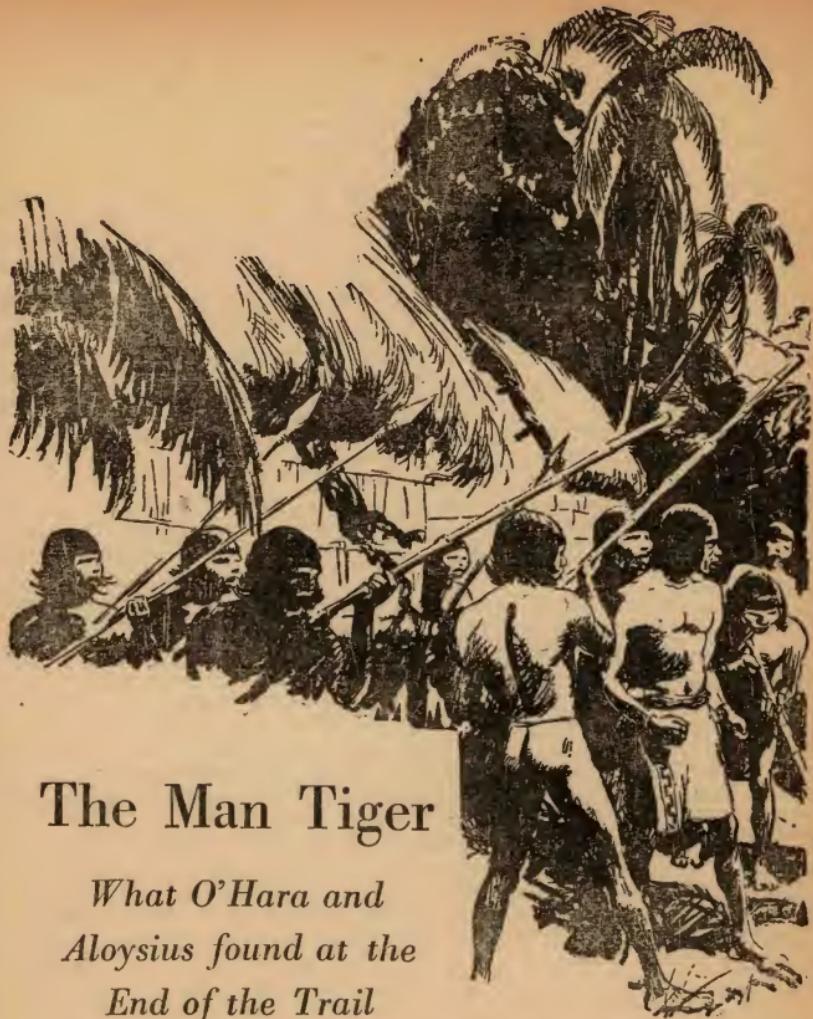
"As a young man he was wild, impetuous and an incurable dreamer; it was at this period of his life that he met the very young and very beautiful lady who later became his wife. It was, I believe at some evening party or other where young Revanoff was giving a pianoforte recital that he first saw her.

"The lady was, one may take it, as much enamoured with this earnest young musician as he was with her. In any event soon they were married; and in a terribly short time afterwards she was dead. By what blind, unreasoning act of fate this awful thing came about was never certain.

"You can imagine the effect of this cruel blow upon such a one as Feodor Revanoff. He was for a time demented, inconsolable with grief; in the extremity of his remorse he set to work and wrote a piece of music which told the tragic story of his restless life and of his lost love. It was fated to become a memorial to them both; for soon after the completion of this composition he died . . . of a broken heart. But his melody lives on. . . ."

Here the narrator broke off; in the tap-room of the 'Rampant Ox' there was a profound silence. Presently he continued—

"Legend has it that Feodor Revanoff will return and that when he does his melody will be heard again in the house down the lane. . . ."



The Man Tiger

*What O'Hara and
Aloysius found at the
End of the Trail*

By JUBA KENNERLEY

FOR the tenth time that afternoon James O'Hara angrily flung the book from him to where it landed with a flop on the rickety floor of the "dak" bungalow which temporarily served to house his bored and fretful person.

The only response to this outburst was a half-hearted growl from Aloysius, a three parts pi dog, who had recently adopted O'Hara "thaken" as master and who had at that moment been comfortably snoozing under the building's solitary table. Aloysius resented being

awakened from his siesta, to what he clearly considered an unjustifiable consciousness. To mosquito bites he was reasonably hardened, but this sudden disturbance a few inches from his nose, he felt was a bit too thick! From one bilious eye the dog favoured his master with a disconcerting stare, then apparently satisfied that all was well, promptly went to sleep again.

Why in heaven's name fumed the irate Celt to himself, must lady explorers be permitted to write stories of impossible adventures in a country that he, a forest ranger of many years standing, had reason to believe he knew better than most men. How could that infernal Burmese clerk in the Bhamo Club library, who had been responsible for dispatching the offending volume, be idiot enough to imagine that he, of all people might like to read such undiluted rubbish?

Fifteen years is a long time for a white man to spend in the unhealthy forests of Upper Burmah, where the pitiless rains and eternal solitude seem sooner or later bound to undermine the stoutest constitution. It was nearly three years since James had last tested any civilised life and the store of energy acquired on his last precious leave, was now nearly dissipated.

The general raggedness of his nerves, the stubborn refusal of his stomach to cope any longer with indifferent food and too much whisky, were warning notes that could not be disregarded. It was not that he was unaware of this state of affairs, far from it, but as he reflected, what could he do about it. It was his job to exist somehow or other in these forests, bad as they were.

He was no Government forest man who could more or less contrive to confine his forest operations to tours of inspection during the cold weather. No . . . no such agreeable arrangement was possible for a member of a commercial forestry company. Its staff was perforce expected, except for brief visits to their area head-quarters at

long intervals, to spend their lives each in his own special jungle hell.

Secretly, James, in spite of the fact that whenever he chanced on a sympathetic listener, never failed to air his views on the manifest drawbacks of his present form of existence, was proud of the fact that he could call himself a genuine "dyed in the wool" jungle "wallah." There was not much doubt that our hero gloried in his ability to stand up to the hardships of his profession, as in his abundant knowledge of forest lore and in his feigned understanding of the strange, sometimes wholly inexplicable things that happened in these desolate eerie jungles about him.

Presently, feeling slightly ashamed at this exhibition of peevishness and vaguely alarmed at his obviously nervy condition, he manfully dragged his wasted frame from the long arm chair in which he had been lounging and shuffled across the room towards the table. With back bent, he lazily stooped and retrieved the book which a few minutes earlier had so vastly irritated him, irritating as it might be, he simply had to read something for somehow or other he had to keep his mind occupied.

It does not do to let one's mind wander and feed on itself in such latitudes. Unfortunately he had long since consumed his remaining stock of literature. Books, magazines and newspapers had all been greedily devoured, many of them having been read twice over, and the worst of it was that the runner from headquarters could not be expected to arrive for at least another week with fresh supplies.

Back once more in the long chair, he applied himself again with grim determination to the nauseating work. With the blood slowly mounting to his head he read that the khaki clad Lady Mavis somebody or other, alone, unattended and apparently unarmed was engaged in a life and death struggle with some fearful denizen of the jungle.

The good lady's manifest lack of

knowledge of her subject was maddening enough to the highly strung James but that she should dare to stage this thrilling encounter in his own particular district was more than flesh and blood could stand.

THE TIGER MESSENGER

Unable to bear any more of this "tosh" and cursing horribly he once again hurled this highly inflammatory work to the floor and looked up with a sense of baffled fury, to meet the startled eyes of a small, timid Burmese boy who crept noiselessly into the bungalow.

Patiently kneeling on the floor, his absurdly tiny hands clasped, palms pressed together in the traditional manner of one who has supplication to a superior, he was waiting for just such a moment. "Thaken, thaken!" (Master, master), he bleated.

Ba pyit dhi le (What is it?) queried James whose normal good humour had miraculously returned to him. Gently but nevertheless with some degree of firmness, for he was too old a hand to permit himself the least sign of surprise at the unexpectedness of this visit, he repeated his question.

For a moment or too longer the small visitor hesitated, then at last satisfied that the "white man" really was going to give him his full attention, he launched out on a very torrent of words in his own melodious tongue.

"I am a messenger 'thaken' from Maung Gyi's camp, one of your timber contractors, if the most noble lord may remember."

"Yes, I know him well . . . go on with your story," murmured James settling himself more comfortably in his chair, old stager as he was, he foresaw that the lad's tale embroidered in true Burmese fashion was likely to be long and tedious, he would probably need every scrap of patience he possessed to hear him out.

"Last night," the boy began, "it was decided by my comrades that I should be the one who should journey to the camp of the most noble lord, whereby I might seek his aid on a most serious matter."

"Yes, yes, but if it is so serious a matter," interrupted this obtruse "thaken," "why did not Maung Gyi come to me himself, or send one of his headmen, rather than a small boy like you?"

"Master it is on account of my smallness that they elected me, they said that fear would lend speed to my feet."

Probably they were right, but to James it smelt far too much like child cruelty.

"Koung byee" (very well), "continue," he muttered, still in the dark as to the real cause of the boy's urgency.

"Master I will tell you everything," the youngster paused then blurted out, "it is a tiger that troubles us" (shuddering), "a man tiger. . . . He has twice been to our camp, and each time he has taken a man . . . will not the brave 'thaken' come and slay him for us? All of my comrades," he blubbered, "have by now I fear fled to their homes, but I . . . I have no home, and shall be alone." Whereupon the youngest collapsed into silence.

Hands clasped behind his head, seemingly unaware of the boy's questioning eyes upon his face, James pondered over all he had just heard. The situation was without doubt one which required not merely prompt attention, but also careful handling. This Maung Gyi was probably the most powerful and wealthy contractor in the whole of Upper Burmah, and a man who was responsible for doing much valuable work on behalf of James' Company. Furthermore, as the old boy himself had not reported the matter he might resent the "thaken's" interference in a problem which he might consider himself competent to solve.

At any time the close proximity of tiger, especially of the man-eating variety, to a native camp is a rather dis-

turbing element, but however, it would hardly account, so James reasoned, for the utter panic that apparently prevailed in Maung Gyi's camp on the occasion of the marauder's second visit. So scared were the inhabitants according to his informant, that practically all had fled, few of them even stopping long enough to gather up their personal belongings.

There must be something very unusual behind all this, for tiger abounded in the district, so much so that depredations on cattle and on the men's camps were of no uncommon occurrence, in fact they were regarded by the philosophical jungle natives as all part of the day's work.

James found it difficult to believe that this "killer" was other than an unusually bold and determined man-eater. Not so the boy, who was unshakable in his belief that this beast was that most dreaded thing in jungle life, a "man-tiger." Again and again the little fellow had insisted that it could be nothing else.

THE LEGEND



These fabulous beasts, native superstition has it, are ordinary mortals by day, whilst by night their spirit enters the bodies of tiger, thereby endowing them with the utmost cunning and devilry. Sheer nonsense James reflected, but . . . it is well nigh impossible to convince the primitive jungle man that he is not right. Such belief is by no means peculiar to Burmah, for throughout the length and breadth of Asia, there exist legends concerning these awesome monsters. The "tiger men" are in very truth, the "were wolves" of the fetish-ridden East.

Often enough had the long-suffering James been treated to accounts of such creatures. Painstakingly he had sifted

the evidence, only to find it to be of the flimsiest nature, largely in fact the figments of excited Asiatic imagination. Yet he had to admit that on rare occasions he had heard of some super beast, which eluded all attempts at its destruction and whose peculiarities were not easily explained away.

Perhaps that was why James was at the moment feeling so unaccountably disturbed and worse still, undecided as how to cope with this alarming situation. The presence of an animal credited with these qualities was a menace, and he realised with some annoyance that he need not expect anybody to turn out for work until it had been destroyed.

James O'Hara, a North Irishman whose reputation for slow thinking was a joke amongst his intimate friends, was like many other so-called slow thinkers, in one respect; when he had finally made up his mind, he acted quickly. Jumping to his feet, he dismissed the small boy with instructions to await him in the servants quarters.

Then, with a yell that seemed to shake the very roof of the bungalow, he let his "bearer" know that the "thaken" required his presence, and at once James had decided on a plan of action! He would himself spend a night or two at Maung Gyi's camp, where armed with a rifle, and a supply of ammunition, he would await a possible third visit of this daring raider, for he felt pretty certain that the animal emboldened by its previous successes, would not hesitate to enter the camp again if he felt like it. The rest would be easy, or so James thought to himself!

James's own preparations for this venture were of the scantiest nature. They merely consisted in selecting from a miniature armoury of sporting rifles, the most serviceable looking weapon and of the methodical bestowal of cartridges into the numerous pockets of a much favoured and cunningly designed shooting jacket.

By the time that he had adjusted this

article of attire to his liking, his "bearer" having worked at lightning speed was ready with a packsack crammed tight with blankets, mosquito net, and a selection of tinned foods.

A few minutes later James was on the march with his rifle slung on his shoulder. Close at his heels trotted the ubiquitous Aloysius, who now, thoroughly awake, did not intend to miss any fun that was going. Tail held high, revealing, perhaps, an all too slender family connection with dog, or dogs, of a colder clime, nose to ground, Aloysius padded through the jungle mud, not caring one jot where he went, so long as he was reasonably near that beloved, long-legged figure.

Right in the vanguard of the little party marched the messenger from Maung Gyi's camp. He alone knew the trail and had thus quite naturally appointed himself guide to the expedition.

In rear of the column marched Ma Hla, an old and much tried Kachin hunter, on whose head was precariously perched his master's pack-sack. For some reason or other this individual preferred to carry his load in this manner rather than make use of the excellent shoulder-straps attached to the pack-sack.

The trail, a little used one, was in vile condition, wet and so overgrown that at times it seemed about to disappear altogether. Yet bad though it was it presented few difficulties to the resourceful young guide who, without once faltering, led the way with the unerring instinct of a human bloodhound.

For the best part of two hours James, Aloysius, and his two companions marched silently through the monotonous and dripping forest, hardly a word being exchanged by any member of the party. This habit of silence amongst jungle folk seems to be universal when on the march, and applies alike to dog and man. Custom demands that silence shall prevail, until the destination is finally reached.

No one was sorry when at last, the everlasting green forest gave way to reveal a smallish clearing, in the middle of which stood a rather dilapidated hut, built in the usual Burmese style. That is to say it consisted of a floor of roughly split bamboo laths, supported some six feet above ground level on stout bamboo poles. The whole structure covered by a low roof made from a certain kind of leaf, which, although fragile in appearance, is by reason of the angle at which the roof is set, able to withstand the heaviest tropical downpour.

DESERTED VILLAGE

To say that James's astonishment was mild when the youngster volunteered the information that this meagre building was indeed Maung Gyi's house would hardly be accurate. That the man should have elected to build his camp in so ungettable at a spot was puzzling enough, but that he, a prominent contractor of wealth and standing, should content himself with so humble an abode was a little beyond the grasp of James's none too lucid mind.

It was with a vaguely uneasy feeling that he finally halted the party, and with due observance of Burmese hinterland customs, commanded someone, in this case the small boy, to announce the "white man's" coming to the owner of the property.

Squatting uncomfortably on the bole of a near-by fallen tree, the gloomy dusk of the tropical forest all about him, he vainly set himself to find a solution to the strange problem which this camp presented. What could be the meaning of its forlorn appearance, which, but for the fact that a few embers still glowed under the hut, where someone had been cooking his rice, it might have been deserted for months. Nor was he in the least comforted by Aloysius's queer behaviour,

for he, instead of indulging in a bout of exploration in this unfamiliar territory, as good dogs, "pi" or otherwise are wont to do, cowered miserably, as near as he might to his master's stout calves.

Presently, as James was about to bend down to induce a particularly obstinate wood tick to release his purchase on one of his canine friend's sensitive ears, he became aware of a great ponderous figure emerging from the building. There was no mistaking that grotesque body, his size alone made Maung Gyi a notable personality in a world of small and poorly developed jungle dwellers.

Fascinated and not a little astonished James watched the old contractor descend the flimsy house-ladder which, creaking ominously, nevertheless stood up gallantly to its burden, as he descended with the light and easy grace of a man half his years. Almost as his feet touched the ground, he swiftly turned and faced the oncoming James, who had risen and was advancing with outstretched hand to greet his host to be.

But neither by face nor gesture, did this suave Oriental reveal that he was pleased or otherwise to see the white man. With simple dignity he just slowly sank to his knees in token of respect to his visitor, whereupon having muttered a single sentence several times in a monotonous undertone he rose, and politely accepted the proffered hand.

Then, when the usual flowery salutations had been exchanged between the two, Maung Gyi turned once more and this time led the way to the building from which he had just emerged. Standing respectfully aside he begged his visitor, with a flourish of his hands, to enter.

Whereas the negotiation of the widely spaced rungs of the bamboo ladder was child's play to James and little or no effort to Maung Gyi, despite his portliness, to a dog it presented an almost unsurmountable obstacle. Hardly had James placed a foot inside the building

than the dismal howls of Aloysius reached his ears.

That despondent hound disapproved, as he might, of the camp in general, and was quite determined to let everyone know that he had no intention of enduring its peculiarities in solitude. A word from James and the temporarily distraught Aloysius was lifted up to floor-level by the Burmese youngster who, with the Kachin hunter, had lost no time in scrambling up the ladder in the wake of their "thaken."

Once inside the old contractor hastily produced a small square stool which he placed within comfortable distance of the fire that glowed on an earthen bed in the centre of the floor, politely suggesting as he did so that the illustrious "thaken" should be seated. Then, satisfied that his guest was at his ease, he himself took up a position a pace or two away. Squatting down on his hams, he courteously waited for the "white man" to begin the conversation.

Time had little meaning in the Burmese jungles, and therefore it was quite an appreciable count of that cosmic illusion before the weary James began on what he hoped would not appear to be a too obvious cross-examination of his host.

MAUNG GYI



It was many months since he had had any dealings with Maung Gyi and he had the impression that there really was a great deal more that he ought to know about him. He had, as a matter of fact, always felt that a closer study of the old fellow might somehow repay him. When one came to think of it, James

reflected, who did know much about this rather mysterious Burmese gentleman? His manners were those of a cultured man, he was credited with being the possessor of great wealth, and though a hard taskmaster to his employees, was held in considerable respect throughout the district.

His reputation amongst the simple jungle folk was that of a man who was fair and just in his dealings with those under him. He, unlike the ordinary type of timber contractors (mostly shady customers), never had any difficulties in obtaining as much labour as he wanted.

His well-shaped head and silvered hair, his height (he was exceptionally tall for a Burman, his powerful frame, all combined to make him a most imposing figure. One thing, however, marred his appearance, this was a most frightful facial mutilation. He had, so the story goes, during some guerilla fighting in the last Burmese war, sustained a particularly vicious sword-thrust, which had severed the whole of his top jaw. The effect produced by this truly dreadful disfigurement was remarkable. His lower jaw appeared to be abnormally large and at the same time to protrude outwards in the most terrifying manner.

It was not that James had not seen the old man many times before, but rather that he had never seen him under quite the same conditions as he was seeing him at the moment. The uncanny silence of the forest hut and the fitful light of the smoky teak-wood fire as it played on those rugged and curiously immobile features, together created an atmosphere of almost unbearable eeriness which produced in James a sense of fear that took all his will-power to keep under control.

Aloysius, however, made no bones about being scared, he did not believe in taking chances and so had carefully ensconced himself behind his master, from which vantage point he cautiously surveyed the whole proceedings.

For some inexplicable reason James felt strangely reluctant to break the silence that seemed to brood over the entire place, until with a determined effort he decided that he must pull himself together . . . this would not do at all: that he, James O'Hara, scion of a race of Irish warriors, should permit himself to succumb to what he could only describe as some form of self-hypnosis, was ridiculous.

Throat dry and extremely conscious of the sound of his own voice, he began to talk to his host in precise idiomatic Burmese, a pedantry which he could only explain as due to the fact that the ordinary vernacular seemed out of place with this dignified old man, even though he himself would almost certainly be in the habit of using it with his own men.

Whilst James briefly outlined his scheme for the destruction of the feline marauder, his host sat and listened in his usual deferential manner, but never once by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he intimate that he was more than politely interested. When at last his visitor had finished talking, Maung Gyi still offered no comment one way or the other, he merely bowed his approval, meantime assuring him that his goods, his house, etc., were at his entire disposal to do as he wished.

With that he rose and begged to be allowed to retire to his own quarters of the hut, giving as an excuse, his belief that the "thakan" would certainly be desirous of food and refreshment, but that native etiquette forbade him to remain while he ate. Although still anxious to continue his conversation with his host, James could not deny that he was distinctly hungry and that Maung Gyi's insistence on the proprieties was perfectly correct.

Barely had the old boy retired to a corner of the hut, roughly screened off from the rest, than Ma Hla, the Kachin hunter, having overheard the conversation, immediately began producing tins of food from the pack-sack to view,

with not a little pride. There was no great choice of viands and it was soon despatched. On this occasion the usually indulgent James permitted himself but one solitary whisky; any more, and he knew that he could never hope to keep awake during the long hours of waiting ahead of him.

The meal over, he set about his preparations for the night's work. His first job was to make it clear, by means of fearful threats, to the odd handful of men who still remained in the camp, that they had to concentrate themselves in the centre of the hut, as much for their own protection as to give himself room to deal with an attack coming from an unexpected quarter.

This accomplished, he selected what he judged to be the most strategical position, and with Aloysius on his right side and Ma Hla on his left, the latter armed with his "thaken's" heavy .450 Colt, which however, he had been dared to use except under the direst emergency, he settled down to await what the night should bring forth.

VIGIL

Well, nothing did happen that night at all. By daybreak James's patience had been rewarded with nothing more than the registration of some hundreds of mosquito bites, plus a sorely tried temper. Very unpleasant, it is true, but hardly sufficient to deter boys of the O'Hara breed. He had already made up his mind to try again, as he had much pleasure in informing Maung Gyi, on whose face he thought he detected the shadow of a smile, when he met him later in the morning.

Obsequious as ever, he murmured that it was not for him, a humble Burmese contractor, to criticise the noble "thaken's" most laudable ambition. Spreading his hands he again exclaimed:

"Are not my house and worldly goods at your disposal, 'Thaken', as

long as you may feel inclined?"

Once more James thanked him with the usual exhibition of effusive politeness, even though he was secretly cursing him and his infernal camp, as in like manner, he shrewdly guessed that the old humbug was cursing too, for inflicting himself on him.

What did he, Maung Gyi, care about tigers . . . man-eating or otherwise; after all, what were a few jungle labourers one way or another?" James well knew the fatalism and the cynicism of the Burmese mind.

For the next three days and nights James never moved more than twenty yards from the camp. By day he slept, by night he kept watch in company with Ma Hla and Aloysius, whose ill-concealed hatred of his present surroundings showed no signs of abating, but never by sound or smell did the tiger reveal itself.

It was all very odd! What had scared this determined "killer" away? There was no precaution that James could think of that he had neglected, even to the extent of refraining from washing himself, a sacrifice indeed in that sticky climate; but one wholly necessary, for tigers seem to have a peculiar power of distinguishing between the well-washed European and the unwashed native.

No . . . he was certain that it could not be a question of smell, he defied any native to smell any more "native" than he contrived to do during the past three days. Whatever the cause the brute had apparently "taken his hook" and he therefore reasoned that any further waiting for it would be nothing less than sheer waste of time.

It was not long before James learnt that he was not alone in holding this opinion, for in the inexplicable way that news seems to travel amongst primitive people, it had got abroad that the "thaken" had stayed at Maung Gyi's camp without being molested by the "killer."

To their way of thinking this could

mean but one thing, their enemy was temporarily sated with killing, and had taken himself off elsewhere. It was soon evident that it was thought safe by a number of the runaway labourers to return to duty, for by midday most of them were back "in the fold."

More affable than he had been throughout James's entire stay, Maung Gyi lost no time in informing his visitor that his men's return was a positive proof that the tiger really had taken his departure.

Not wholly satisfied that such was the case, James nevertheless felt constrained to take the hint implied, which, he could only interpret as meaning that his host did not think his presence was any longer of vital importance to the safety of the camp. Perhaps the old man was right after all, he reflected. In which case he was wasting time that he could ill afford and therefore the sooner he put the matter out of his mind and returned to his own camp the better for all concerned.

Aloysius held no two views on the subject; he at least was firmly convinced that the party had been there quite long enough. Immediately he spotted the obvious preparations for his departure he began to register his approval with a bout of delirious barking, only pausing to hand out one final frightful scowl on old Maung Gyi, just as the trio turned their faces in the direction that led homewards.

At six o'clock the following morning James was liverishly picking away at his early "chota hasri" when the small boy suddenly appeared again and dropped dejectedly on to the bungalow floor. Eyes sticking out of his head and breath coming in short pants he presented a piteous spectacle. James guessed there could only be one explanation of such a visit . . . that infernal tiger had been at his deadly work again!

Nor was he wrong as he learnt from a swift interrogation of the agitated youngster. The striped fiend had yet

once more entered their camp in the early hours, coolly selected another victim, and carried the unfortunate wretch into the jungle. All the men, harassed beyond fear, had gone forth with their spears.

TOO MUCH



This was altogether too much; James nearly choked with rage. To think that this should have happened on the very night after he had elected to give up his watch. Confound that stupid old Maung Gyi . . . he was in for a warm quarter of an hour when next he saw him. If the old fool had not been so cock-sure about the tiger's withdrawal, the yellow brute might now be lying dead with one of James's high velocity bullets in his brain.

Far more angry than he normally permitted himself to be he rose and began to pace rapidly up and down the narrow bungalow veranda. By Jove! He had it . . . he would go over to the camp this very minute, for not only would he be able to vent his spleen on the old man but he would make a serious attempt to follow the "killer" on foot, providing the "spoor" was reasonably fresh.

Without a word of warning to his own staff, he was going to do this job alone, he picked up a rifle, stuffed a handful of cartridges into his pocket, then beckoning to the small boy, who by this time had recovered himself, he stole quietly down the bungalow steps. It might have been easy enough for James to deceive his own boys but to fool Aloysius was quite another

matter! Very little was allowed to pass the sharp eyes and pointed ears of that animal without investigation, and to his way of thinking there was something enormously suspicious in the manner in which his master had sneaked off the premises.

There must have been indeed, for Aloysius had paused in the act of lowering a tasty snack at the kitchen door and that was not the kind of thing that he did lightly. Curiosity, however, won and with a bound he leapt away, intent on learning the why and the wherefore of such strange "goings on."

James was none too pleased when a few minutes later he heard the delighted barks of Aloysius behind him. He was normally glad enough to have his canine friend beside him, but, as he knew by past experience, that dogs, even the best of them, are apt to be a bit of a nuisance when one is engaged in the ticklish job of tiger-hunting. However, it was no earthly use attempting to remonstrate with Aloysius once he had set his mind on a particular thing, it was far easier just to fall in with his whim, for after all it was nothing but love on his part.

With a curt command James bade the determined hound take up a position in the rear of the column. It was in that formation that the three of them, a few hours later, arrived again at the clearing in which was situated Maung Gyi's unlucky camp. Dispensing for once with the usual ceremony, James marched straight up to the hut steps where he halted and loudly bellowed for the owner, but no reply being forthcoming he quickly mounted the steps, only to discover on entering the gloomy hut, that it was completely unoccupied.

It looked very much as if the old chap had lost his nerve on account of this third attack and bolted with the rest of his men. Well, what if he had, James speculated, there was nothing that he could do about it; at the moment he was more concerned with

getting on the trail of the "killer" which was responsible for all the trouble.

A brief examination of the ground in the vicinity of the hut revealed only too clearly what had happened there but a few hours earlier. There on all sides were the great square "pug"-marks of a monster tiger and there also was the break in the side of the hut through which the brute had dragged his victim. From this spot onwards the path which the huge feline had followed was as clear as daylight, its prey held in its powerful jaws, indeed the veriest blockhead could not have failed to have interpreted his story.

His blood up and any anxiety he might have felt about the extreme risk of the undertaking temporarily in abeyance to his overpowering desire to bring this dreadful beast to "book," James plunged madly into the jungle, fingering expertly at the bolt of his rifle as he went. Excited, yet still cool-headed enough to remember that "man-eaters" are not as other beasts and for all he knew this one might easily by "lying up" within a few hundred yards of the camp, he realised therefore that he must put a check on his rather reckless pursuit.

He had barely penetrated a dozen yards into the thicket, when something caused him to come to an abrupt halt . . . for there, huddled up on the wet mud was the body of a man. There was no mistaking that mountain of flesh, it could be but one person only! Maung Gyi had this time fallen a victim to the tiger which he had always presumed to ignore, and somewhere near at hand, James reasoned, there would be lurking the animal which must have slaughtered the old chap.

Uncomfortable sensation this . . . knowing that at any moment five hundred pounds or so of raging yellow fury might be about to launch itself at one. Rifle at the "ready" and every nerve strained to catch the slightest sound of movement, James crept cautiously towards the body.

Judge then his incredible astonishment when on gazing down at the pitiable object at his feet, he discerned on it no wounds which could have been inflicted by any tiger, mortal or otherwise. The man's body was riddled by a score or more of spear-thrusts! What in the name of heaven was the meaning of it all, James muttered aloud. Who or what was responsible for his killing?

There seemed no solution to the mystery until he suddenly perceived on the other side of the body that the ground was literally studded with human footprints . . . shaken as he was by this discovery it was nothing to what he felt when he saw that the tiger's pug-marks which led directly to the body from that point completely

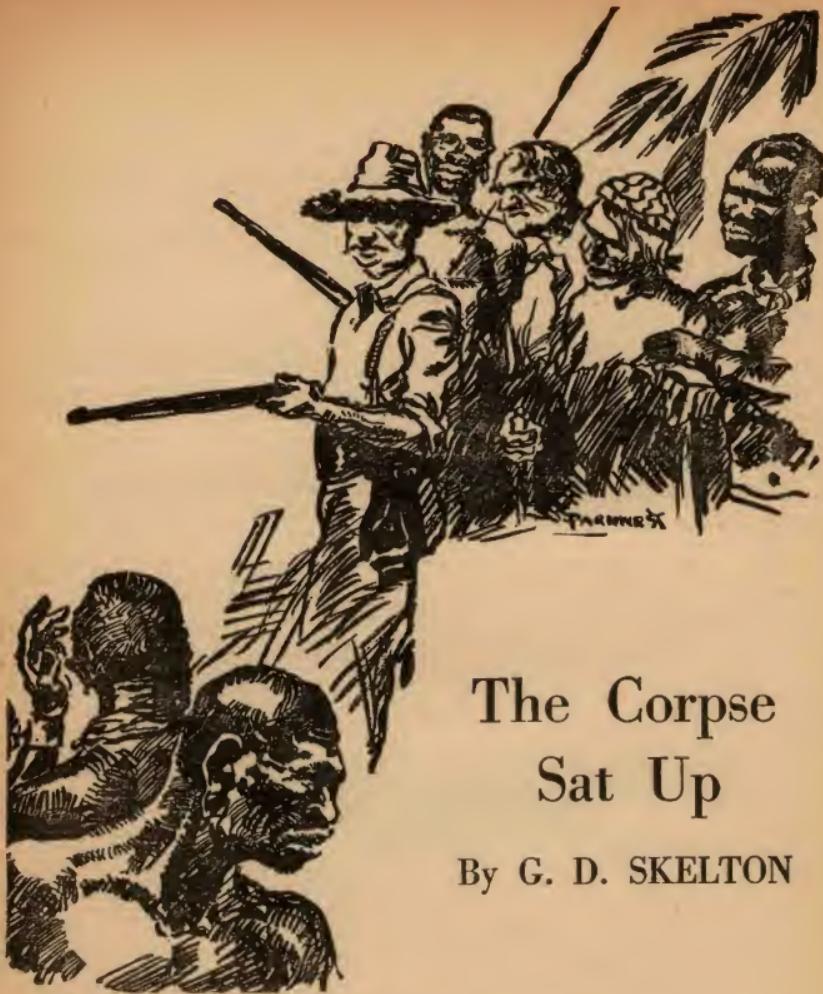
and utterly disappeared!

It was at this point, to use James's own words, his scalp began to tickle, his hair to stand slowly on end, the blood to coagulate in his veins, as with cold horror he realised that the thought which was gradually forming in his own mind must have been in the primitive minds of Maung Gyi's men when they decided that he must die.

It does not do for white men in the solitudes of these great forests to think such things, and he turned to recall Aloysius who at that moment with lips bared in an ugly snarl, and coat rough with fright, was viewing the scene with unutterable loathing.

With one accord dog and man took to their heels and fled.





The Corpse Sat Up

By G. D. SKELTON

I FORGET how the subject arose, but all at once we found ourselves talking of reflexes, and from there the conversation developed into an absorbing discussion of nervous manifestations after death. It was a topic that seemed to interest vastly every single member of the club, and before long even the normally unobtrusive members were part of the group around the smoking-room fire and were telling us of their experiences

in this particular line.

"I remember when I was a kid," one of these was telling us, "my father decapitated a chicken while I looked on. I was scared stiff when the blessed thing suddenly began to run about the yard without its head. It's quite true they do do that—it wasn't merely childish imagination."

"Charles the First walked and talked half an hour after his head was cut off. That's what I was told as a

child," came a voice from the far end of the room, when the murmurs of appreciation had subsided. The group round the fire opened smilingly to make room for Sir Francis Perry, K.C., who had announced his entry with the statement about Charles the First. The puzzle was familiar, I suppose, to all of us and we greeted it and the speaker chucklingly. Only the shy narrator of the chicken episode, whose name, by the way, was Jones, seemed disposed to question the statement.

"Oh, there's a catch in that," he explained seriously. "It's only a matter of punctuation."

Sir Francis regarded him banteringly.

"If your chicken could run around without a head, I don't see why King Charles shouldn't," he observed. "Or have chickens some extra faculty that humans haven't got?"

Jones spent a moment in thought.

"I've never heard of any example of nervous reaction in humans after death," he said eventually.

Sir Francis smiled.

"Haven't you heard that if you tickle the soles of the feet of a human corpse it will sit up?" he asked, but Jones's reply was lost in the general laughter.

"I don't know if it's true," Sir Francis went on. "I've never had a corpse to play with personally."

"I tried that once."

The members turned in surprise towards a white-haired, bearded man who had so far been a silent member of the group. There was a pause.

"And what happened?" Sir Francis asked finally.

The elderly man, whom we knew as John Batchelor, a retired mining engineer whose main characteristic was taciturnity, leaned forward and knocked out his pipe on the fender.

"I'll have to tell you the whole story," he said. "If you'd care to hear it."

"By all means."

"It happened about thirty years ago," Batchelor began, as he slowly filled his pipe. "I and a colleague called —what was his name?—oh yes, Jackson, were in South America at the time, chasing oil, as a matter of fact. There was a war on at the time, a not unusual state of affairs down there at any time, as you know."

"I don't know what the dispute was about—it doesn't matter—but anyhow it was confined to two of the smaller countries, Pantonia and Asuria, which had a common border running through them."

"There was a lot of wild country round there, and quite by accident Jackson and I stumbled on the border between the two countries. We didn't realise we'd done anything of the kind, of course, for there was nothing to show where one country began and the other ended. If we had realised we'd have retraced our steps hurriedly, for it's not the wisest thing to enter a country at war over an unguarded frontier."

"But, as luck would have it, we happened to separate for a little while just at that spot, and, not five minutes after Jackson had left me, the trouble started."

"As I said before, a strange man walking around alone near the borders of a country at war is liable to arouse suspicion. Anyhow, I suddenly found myself face to face with a handful of fellows in the maddest set of uniforms you ever saw. No two of them were alike, but be that as it may, they were serving under the Pantonian flag, and they promptly arrested me."

"It was no use putting up a fight, so I submitted quietly, trusting that I should be taken to somebody in authority to whom I could explain that I was an Englishman and the victim of a quite innocent mistake."

"That, it seemed, was exactly what was going to happen to me, for, after a hasty search and the removal of my revolver, the band of soldiers set off in

the direction from which they had come, with me in the middle of them.

"They were chattering excitedly in a strange sort of Spanish as they went along, but I scarcely bothered to listen to them, although I could pick up what they were saying if I listened hard. As a matter of fact, I was rather worried about Jackson. It would be rather tough on him to come back and find me gone, without even a note to tell him where I was, so to speak. Still, I thought he'd probably stumble on another band like the one that had found me, so I consoled myself that we would probably meet again in whatever camp these Johnnies were taking me to.

"It didn't turn out like that, as a matter of fact—but I'll tell you later what happened to Jackson.

PRISONER AT HEADQUARTERS

"Well, after we had been walking for about half an hour, we suddenly came on a clearing near a group of trees, and there quite a moderate sized camp was established. I was marched up to the biggest building there, a ramshackle affair made of logs, and inside I came face to face with the colonel of this Pantonia regiment.

"I was disappointed in the appearance of the fellow, and I soon found that his powers of reasoning were equally disappointing. He was a small, fattish sort of fellow, and he was obviously as pleased as Punch to have taken a prisoner, even though I was an Englishman and alone. He laid a lot of stress on the fact that I was carrying a revolver on me, and even my reasonable explanation of it wasn't going to shift him. Finally I tried a bit of blustering, warned him of the danger of holding up one of His Majesty's subjects, and so on, but it was no good. I was a prisoner and I was jolly well going to remain a prisoner, whether I liked it or not.

"I was in despair as the escort marched me off again. Those wretched

little wars had a habit, I knew, of dragging on for years, and, of course, communications weren't then what they are now. It would probably be months before word of my disappearance got through to England, and then a few more months before one Government department or other started to do anything about it. There was nothing for it but to grin and bear it.

"I will say those fellows treated me pretty well. My escort took me to a little hut on the edge of the camp which was apparently empty, and there I was left, with a guard outside, until further notice.

"They fed me well, I know, but you must admit it was pretty lonely in that wretched little hut, with nothing to keep me occupied but a Spanish translation of the Bible which a sympathetic guard lent me, and spasmodic attempts on my part to make conversation with whoever was put there to keep a watch on me. They were nice enough, those guards, and they were quite willing to chat with me, but still, military discipline was military discipline, so it wasn't altogether easy.

"Well, as the day went by, I began to get very worried about Jackson, who hadn't turned up to share my prison as I'd half hoped. At last I decided to question one of my guards, so when my favourite, the fellow who had lent me the Bible—a decent young fellow—came on duty one evening, I set about the matter as tactfully as I could.

"It was then that I got a bit of a shock—for this fellow told me he had heard that another Englishman had fallen into the hands of the enemy Ascurians about the same time that the Pantonians had got me.

"They found him wandering near the border,' my guard told me. 'They're holding him prisoner at the camp.'

"How far away is their camp?' I asked eagerly.

"The guard hesitated a moment. 'Not more than a mile south,' he said finally.

"It was rather an ironic situation. There were Jackson—for I was sure this Englishman was Jackson—and myself, both prisoners and almost within a stone's throw of each other, but in enemy camps! It was almost laughable."

"Well, after that the guard shut up and I could get nothing else out of him. I think he felt he had said a good deal more than he should have said, and he certainly had."

"These Pantonians and Ascurians, by the way, never appeared to do any fighting. They seemed quite happy to remain where they were and take what stray prisoners came their way, even if they were only Englishmen."

"I now began to think very seriously of attempting to make a get-away, if only to the Ascurians' camp, for I reckoned it would be far pleasanter to let myself be taken prisoner over there, if necessary, so that I could at least be with Jackson."

"Escaping was not so easy as I'd hoped, however. You see, I wasn't left alone for a minute, night or day, and, short of attacking the guard and making a dash for it, I couldn't see any way out. And as I hadn't any sort of instrument to put the guard out cleanly and silently for a few minutes, things looked pretty hopeless. Besides—it may sound silly, but I'd come to like my guards, and I wasn't too keen on getting violent with them. I thought of bribery, but the Colonel had seen that all my money had been taken away from me, so that was no good."

"Another week went by, and then I had a really terrible shock. My favourite guard came on duty that night with a face as long as Southend pier."

"'I've just heard,' he whispered, 'that the Englishman in the enemy camp died early this evening.'

"I didn't believe it at first. 'Died naturally, or was he shot?' I asked finally."

"'Naturally, I believe,' replied the

guard, who seemed curiously *au fait* with Ascurian affairs. 'It was very sudden. We saw them carrying the body to the mortuary outside the camp. They'll probably bury him to-morrow.'

"Well, you can imagine what I felt like. Jackson dead out here, miles away from friends and relations. It seemed a rotten end for him. Besides, Jackson and I were good friends, and I was upset on my own account."

"The guard was very sympathetic. I think he realised that Jackson and I were friends. I thought then that I might possibly take advantage of his sympathy and get round him to let me make a get-away, but of course I soon realised the futility of the idea. What use could Jackson and I be to each other now?"

"And then, the very next evening my chance to escape came. There was a sudden sound of excitement in the camp, some raucous bugle calls and then an absolute furore of shouts and scurrying.

"My guard seemed to be wondering what was up. Anyhow, he stood at the door of my hut and kept his eyes turned towards H.Q. I seized the opportunity to slip round him and hurry round to the other side of the hut. From there I had to make a hasty dash across an open stretch to the shelter of some trees fifty yards away.

"I did it unobserved. Everybody in the camp was too absorbed with the excitement at H.Q. to think about an escaping prisoner. I plunged a good distance into the shelter of the trees before I stopped to think out my plan of action.

"My get-away, as you see, had been entirely unpremeditated. I had nothing with me except the clothes I was wearing—no weapon, no money, no food, no map or compass—so you won't wonder that I even considered seriously the idea of returning to the Pantonian camp and re-entering my prison. After all, I was fairly comfortable there."

"I don't know why the thought of

Jackson should suddenly have flashed across my mind at that moment, but all at once I felt an overwhelming desire to see his body for myself, if only to convince myself that he was really dead.

IN THE ENEMY CAMP



ing to my former guard's vague directions as to the whereabouts of the Ascurian camp. It was getting very dark, and I wasn't feeling too happy at all, until I came on a well trodden path that seemed to lead in the direction I wanted.

"I followed this path for what seemed to me to be five miles at least, but probably the distance was no more than the one mile my guard had mentioned.

"At last I came on a gap in the trees and an odd light here and there showed me that my objective had been reached. I did not take any particular precautions to avoid being seen, for by now I was in a state of mind when I didn't much care what happened to me.

"But, as luck would have it, there wasn't a soul in sight. It seemed that something was on that night, for whereas I'd left the Pantonian camp in a state of uproar, this Ascurian one seemed deserted and as silent as the grave.

"The first thing I had to do was to find the mortuary, in which I had been told Jackson's body was lying. Remembering my guard's statement that it stood outside the camp, I began to look around for an outlying building

that would fill the bill.

"I struck lucky immediately, for, as I approached a medium-sized hut lying seemingly untenanted a few yards from the main camp in the shade of some trees, I noticed a few rough crosses in the ground and beside them a gaping hole which I took to be Jackson's grave.

"I went up to the building and cautiously tried the door. There was no light showing, but the door yielded and I cautiously made my way inside. It was pitch dark.

"I stood in absolute silence for a few minutes, to make sure that the place was empty, and then, summoning my courage, I took a box of matches from my pocket and struck a match.

"The light flared up, revealing in the middle of the room a rough sort of bier on which a body lay. Otherwise the cabin was bare.

"I approached the bier and lit another match. By the light of it I saw without a doubt that it was my friend Jackson who lay there.

"I won't go into my feelings at that time. I must have stood by his side for a very long time in the dark, lost in reflection, for suddenly I came to my senses to realise that footsteps were approaching the cabin.

"Well, there was no way of escape. The window was high and narrow, and the door was out of the question—in fact, I could already hear the sound of a hand on the latch. My guard's remark that Jackson was to be buried that day flashed through my head. Here was the funeral party evidently, though why at this time of night I could not imagine.

"I was caught like a rat in a trap. And the worst of it was that there was utterly nowhere I could hide. As I told you, the bier was the only piece of furniture—if you can call it that—in the room.

"The door of the mortuary opened and a flickering light lit up the far wall. My indifference to being recaptured

had now vanished utterly. I was ready to go to any lengths to escape.

"It was then that I suddenly thought of that saying that Sir Francis here mentioned earlier—that if you tickle the feet of a corpse it will sit up. I'd never tried it—I didn't really believe in it—but now it seemed the only way. If I could make this wretched funeral party think their victim had 'risen,' I reckoned that they'd be out of that door without waiting for explanations. These Latin peoples are rather superstitious, you know."

Batchelor paused to relight his pipe, which had gone out. The group round the fire watched him impatiently.

"Go on," one of them said at last.

Batchelor blew out a thick cloud of smoke.

"Well, as the party came in," he continued, "I lay down beside the bier so as to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, and I started to tickle the soles of Jackson's feet like mad."

"And did he sit up?" asked Sir Francis.

"More than that," Batchelor went on. "He not only sat up pretty quickly, but he let out a piercing yell that made my hair stand on end."

"Well, I reckon I'd have passed that funeral party on the way out if the last of them hadn't succeeded in pulling the door to right in my face. So all I did was to come a fine cropper against the door that made me see stars and planets as well."

"I was in a bit of a daze for the next few minutes, and all I was aware of

was that somebody was half-dragging me out of the hut and into the surrounding trees.

"At last my vision cleared, and I found myself face to face with—Jackson! It was he who had brought me out of the mortuary and into the woods. He was alive, of course—very much so.

"Before the morning came we had both safely crossed the Pantonian-Ascurian border and were once more in a friendly and peaceful country. So that was that."

For a few moments the only sound to be heard in the club smoking-room was the sharp tap of Batchelor's pipe on the fender. Then at last Jones spoke.

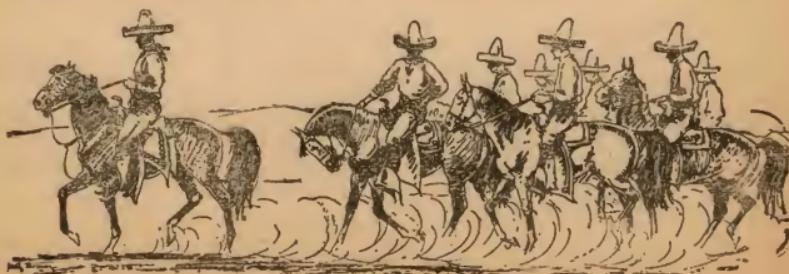
"Do you seriously think," he asked in a rather awed voice, "that you resuscitated a dead man by merely tickling the soles of his feet?"

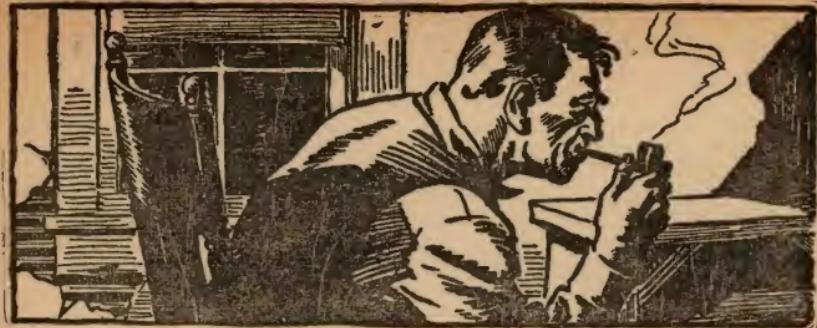
Batchelor looked at his questioner for a moment and a slow smile spread over his face.

"I don't know," he said. "Jackson told me that he had pretended to be dead so as to get a chance to escape from the Ascurian camp, where he had been held a very close prisoner. He told me he was a very ticklish sort of fellow, and my efforts on the soles of his feet had been more than he could bear unmoved."

Batchelor gazed at Jones quizzically.

"Maybe he was telling the truth," he added. "You'll have to decide that for yourself."





Vigilance at Night

The Ghost Car and the Traffic Census

By W. M. COLE

ALTHOUGH it was very late and I was anxious to be indoors, I could not in all conscience pass Joe Brown without exchanging a few words. Joe was on traffic census for the week, from ten o'clock at night to six in the morning. He had a long and lonely vigil to keep.

I felt inclined to laugh at his comical appearance, as he sat in his cabin, basking in the warm, red glow of his brazier. He looked like a broken-down Mephistopheles, taking the count of doomed souls, as he sat there with his pipe, his paper and pencil.

"Some queer things happen on the roads at night," said Joe.

"Well, I've only time to hear one of them, Joe," I remarked, thinking longingly of my bed. Joe began to relate what had happened to him that very week.

It was about one o'clock on Wednesday morning. The night was frosty and brilliant with moonlight. Joe was sitting in his cabin enjoying the warmth of his fire, when he heard a motor-car climbing the hill to his right.

Only three cars had passed him since midnight and the last had gone through at twenty minutes past twelve. Joe was a little drowsy.

This car was coming up the hill and making a terrible noise. It was clanking, rattling and sputtering and every sound carried clearly through the cold, crisp air. The noise must have been extraordinary because Joe got up to see what was happening. He usually marks the cars down sitting back comfortably on his seat, and is moved neither by the newest of new cars nor the oldest of old.

He looked in the direction of the hill but he couldn't see anything for a time. There was only the noise. Joe was accustomed to all sorts of noises emanating from all sorts of vehicles, but this one was arousing his curiosity even before it came into sight.

At last it came up over the top of the hill, gathered up speed, coughed violently and then slowed up a few yards away from Joe's cabin.

He went over to it. It was white, hoary white, as though all the frost in

the county had settled upon it. He looked in through the window, but the glass was frozen over. Joe opened the door and—there was no one in the car!

"That's queer!" said Joe.

"What's queer?" asked a voice.

"That this car has no driver," replied Joe. It takes a lot to catch Joe off his guard. He always has a ready answer.

"There's nothing queer about it," said the voice. "I can easily explain that."

"Oh, you can! Well, let's hear your explanation. Who's speaking, anyway?" challenged Joe.

"I'm a ghost," replied the voice. "The ghost of this car."

"Now that sounds really interesting," said Joe. "Carry on with your story, ghost. Who fixed you?" Joe is a film-fan. His knowledge of cinema jargon and plots is amazing.

"Well, it happened many years ago, on the same night of the year as this. My owner had been growing careless. His driving was reckless, he was always in a hurry and his examinations of the engine infrequent.

"On this particular night he was in a great hurry. It was almost one o'clock in the morning and very frosty like tonight. He was racing along, under the light of a full moon, eager to be indoors. We were almost on the top of a hill and he was putting the engine hard to it.

THE AWFUL OATH



"Sudden ly there came a violent explosion through the exhaust. It sounded like a pistol-shot. He kept me going until we reached the top of the hill

and then he climbed out to see what had happened. I believe he thought a tyre had burst.

"I could hear him at the rear muttering unpleasantly about the delay, and he gave one of the back wheels a hard kick. That was the start of the trouble. He had pulled up at the beginning of a steep slope and the hand-brake was only partly on. That kick sent me forward to my fate. I started to gather speed on the incline. He ran after me, but he was too late.

"Realising what he had done, he commenced to rain down upon me the most dreadful language, in between his gasps for breath as he tried to catch up with me.

"I was almost out of ear-shot when a dire oath came through the silence of the night. The stillness seemed to give added volume to the awful words. It was an oath I dare not repeat, but, because of it, I am consigned to a dreadful fate. I am doomed every year on this day between the hours of one and two o'clock in the morning to travel on the road alone."

"That's a very distressing story," said Joe. "I'm very sorry for you."

"Thank you," said the ghost. "It's been a great relief to tell you my story. You are very kind."

"Not at all," Joe remarked.

"Oh, but you are," replied the ghost. "Whenever I pass a man on my annual run he scoffs at my decrepit state. Cars go by with a roar of derision. People in villages and towns come to their windows, disturbed from their slumber by the noise I make and rain down curses upon my head. But you have been very sympathetic. I wish I could repay you. Would you care to come for a ride?"

"Well, I would like to," said Joe, humouring the ghost, "but I'm afraid I can't. I'm on duty here and unable to leave my post."

"That gives me an idea. You can do something for me. If you go past my cabin, you'll give me a great deal of extra work. There's no column on the census sheets for ghost cars, and I'll

have to make up a special report on you. So will you oblige me by turning and going back the way you came without passing my cabin?"

"Certainly," said the ghost. The engine had by this time regained some of its pristine energy. The car turned and its white coachwork disappeared over the crest of the hill.

"Yes," said Joe. "The ghost sounded his horn in a long, melancholy note of farewell as he went off down the hill. Some queer things happen on the road at night. The drawn-out hoot of that horn shook me, and I shall never forget

the ignition lamp on the dashboard as long as I live. It kept on flashing up vividly red and dying away almost to blackness. It was as though I was looking into the raging fires of a miniature hell."

I bade Joe Brown good-night and walked across the road. I turned and looked back at him, as he sat in the red glow of his brazier. At that distance he seemed a better-groomed Mephistopheles. He, too, appeared to be illuminated by the fires of a miniature hell.

There most certainly are queer things to be seen on the roads at night.





Verge of the Two Worlds

The Ghoulish Presence at the Seance

By ROLAND ARMITAGE

YOU'D better go first, Doctor, and lay the spooks as you go along. I don't want to see 'em."

"I don't think you will, my hearty young friend," replied Dr. Snell quietly, but he swung his fish creel round on to his back and stepped gingerly over the loose stones and through the gap into the old churchyard.

With the exception of Dr. Snell, the party of six fishermen was composed of men in their twenties and early thirties. Snell's gaunt, intelligent-looking face gave no very definite indication of his years, and he might have been anything between fifty and sixty. And yet it was obvious from the sudden cessation of light chatter and banter that had accompanied our passage through the meadows from the river, that this midnight stroll through the dilapidated burial-ground of Holtness, was putting a bigger strain on the nervous system of the party than they would be prepared to admit in broad daylight.

Dr. Snell alone showed no change in his demeanour. The suggestion to take the short cut through the churchyard to the inn had not emanated from him. He had neither approved nor com-

mented upon it, nor had he even taken the lead until young Mather had jokingly pushed him to the front at the gap in the old wall.

I glanced at him now as he carefully threaded his way among the ancient tombstones. Casually, but with careful judgment, he chose the most direct route to the front gate, which would bring us out immediately facing the Inn. He looked neither to right nor left; neither did any other member of the party as I could see from my point of vantage in the rear, but their attitude rather suggested that they looked straight ahead because they did not feel inclined to glance to the side or behind.

Childish, of course. It was quite a bright moonlight night, but I have often noticed that grown men who scoff heartily at ghosts during the bright hours of the day are apt to be rather less dogmatic on the subject during the "wee sma' hours."

Silently the line of men picked a cautious way among the crumbling slabs and crazily leaning headstones; Dr. Snell in the lead, young Mather a yard or so behind. Snell was perhaps a

dozen yards from the gate when from Mather backwards the line pulled up with a jerk! I saw it a fraction later than the men in front!—I suppose I pulled up too!

A white form which had been crouching on a marble "table-top" tombstone slid to the ground with uncanny silence and disappeared round the corner of a high vault. In the short space of time that it was visible we had all seen that it was a large white cat. There was a subdued and embarrassed laugh as three of the party untangled themselves from the little knot that the sudden halt had thrown them into.

Dr. Snell was observed to turn his head and smile quietly. The incident had the effect of choking off any further leg-pulling of the doctor on the subject of spooks for that night.

After a quick "night-cap" in the parlour the other four made their good-night and went off to bed. I stayed with Snell, making my small whisky last as long as his gin-and-gingerbeer. (A weird drink I thought it for 1 a.m.) The man interested me. I could not reconcile the yarns the boys had told me about him, with his look of sober intelligence.

According to young Mather, he was a ghost-hunter of the most banal type, frequenting the cheap séances held in little private houses in the suburbs. I just couldn't visualize Dr. Snell sitting in a solemn circle with a lot of credulous suburban matrons.

During the past five or six weeks since I had first joined the group of fishermen who regularly frequented the "Three Tuns" at Holtness, I had never heard him refer to his curious hobby, although I had heard plenty of chaff and banter on the matter from our young confreres. On the subject of the supernatural, I like to think that I keep an open mind. At any rate, I am prepared to admit that there are certain manifestations that cannot be explained by the sciences as far as man has developed them.

FISHERMEN'S TALES—AND OTHERS



Mind you, I have had no sort of psychic experiences myself, probably because like most Englishmen I hate to make a fool of myself. I have not attempted any investigation into the subject, and have satisfied my curiosity with a little desultory reading. And certainly there is not any real connection between fishermen's tales and uncanny ones, unless both are held not to be of conspicuous accuracy.

Nevertheless, I was sitting in the tiny bar-parlour of the "Three Tuns" trying to make a short whisky last as long as a long gin-and-ginger with the full intention of "drawing-out" Dr. Snell on the subject of ghosts. Our little adventure in the churchyard I thought would provide a good opening gambit.

"Rather amusing that one small cat could throw a scare into five grown men, Doctor, wasn't it?" I remarked. "You were the only one of the party that didn't get ready to make a bolt for it, I think."

"Oh! I saw the animal when we were some distance away," he explained generously. I had previously noticed that the doctor had exceedingly keen eyesight.

"Still, I suppose it would take more than that to startle you after the experiences you must have had." I went on with an effort to sound casual.

He regarded me silently over his glass for a moment.

"Well, yes," he said, and glanced suggestively at the grandfather clock in the corner. I should imagine that the doctor's experiences with sceptical and would-be humorous friends had made him chary of discussing his

hobby, and I hastened to convince him of my sincerity.

"It's an interesting study and deserving of much more serious thought than many people are prepared to give it," I ventured. The doctor nodded slight acquiescence, but made no comment, and I went on hastily lest he should attempt to change the subject.

"No doubt you have seen things at the séances you attend which, as a man of science, you feel are not capable of normal explanation."

Dr. Snell's eyes twinkled and then he smiled quietly. I had a feeling that my little attempt at flattery had been perhaps a trifle crude.

"I am afraid that Mather's account of my ghost-hunting proclivities while no doubt perfectly accurate, in the main, have given you a wrong impression," he said pleasantly. "I do not attend séances—I have attended only one séance—I shall not attend another."

Obviously there was a story on the way. The doctor could not just leave it at that, and I waited with eager curiosity for him to continue. For a few moments he regarded me quizzically. He was either collecting his thoughts or he was making up his mind as to whether I was a fit subject for his confidence.

"I was quite a young fellow, only just out of hospital, when I first began to take an interest in psychical research," he continued finally. "An experience I had by the deathbed of an old lady who had passed on only a week after her husband, gave me my first real intimation that there was some form of continuity of existence after I and my fraternity had pronounced life extinct." He paused and gazed thoughtfully at the bar window showing black against the whitewashed wall.

"But that's another story," he said, pulling himself together with an effort. "I had other experiences later, of course. In my profession, standing as one so often does at the verge of the two worlds, we have opportunities for

observation not granted to others. Not that I claim to be in any way mediumistic—not in the usual accepted sense of the word, anyway.

"It is my theory that anyone who keeps an open and receptive mind can occasionally make contact with the other plane. At any rate, I saw sufficient to stimulate my interest in the subject, and for many years I have made a study of psychic phenomenon. Not that I allowed it to become a mania with me.

"As a struggling young G.P. I could not afford the time, and even in later years my contribution to the science has mostly taken the form of an occasional treatise on the subject, written for some of the more reputable psychical magazines. Purely theoretical concepts, bear in mind, argued out along lines of logic. Perhaps I have attained some little eminence among serious students of the supernatural—at all events, I have had the honour of communicating with some of our greatest living authorities, and my views have received their commendation."

The doctor paused for a long sip at his glass. He appeared to be a little embarrassed at what he probably considered to be a rather boastful statement, but a glance at my face apparently reassuring him as to my respectful interest, he continued.

"But you want to hear about my séance—my only séance, of course. As I mentioned before, my approach to the study of the supernatural had been chiefly theoretical. I had certainly never attended a séance. In fact, my reading on the subject had drawn me to the conclusion that these professional mediums, more especially those who run their semi-public séances, were mostly fraudulent. At any rate, the results they obtained were invariably trivial and certainly not evidencial. Such was my opinion at that time—I speak of some six months ago.

"Therefore, when one of my patients, Stevenson by name, quite an intelligent

fellow, who runs a very successful estate agency business, suggested that I ought to visit a Mrs. Power, a medium of some local repute at Watford, in whom he took a terrific interest, I confess that I was not impressed. I believe I made a sort of half promise to accompany him on some future occasion, and quickly forgot about it. But he was persistent—also he was very cunning. He continued to make me believe that he himself had doubts of the woman, and desired my help to investigate the genuineness of the manifestations she produced. Incidentally, his subsequent behaviour when in her presence revealed the true character of this little subterfuge. He was as much under the spell of her dominant personality as the most credulous of her dupes.

THE SEANCE

"However, I suppose the subtly implied flattery of his attitude finally did the trick, and I found myself one Sunday night driving friend Stevenson over to Watford. Mrs. Power's house was one of the most ordinary of those beastly little villas that string out along the Great North Road in that district.

"We were shown in by Mrs. Power herself. A little bird-like woman in black, with a mincing, twittering style of speech. I strongly suspect that she was born within sound of Bow Bells, for in spite of a heavily applied refined accent, the Cockney drawl of South London would occasionally creep in. To my great surprise, she greeted my companion as Mr. Brown. It appears that at these private séances it is regarded as a sovereign remedy against fraud to give a false name.

"Working on the principle of 'When in Rome . . .' I signed my name in an imposing visitors' book as Mr. Green. I remember fatuously thinking that this Mr. Green was nothing like so green as he signed himself.

"Friend Stevenson's demeanour in the presence of our voluble hostess was reminiscent of the attitude of a junior acolyte in the presence of the high priests. He volunteered obsequiously to conduct me upstairs himself. Outside the door of the 'holy of holies', which was the front bedroom of the villa, was a massive silver salver containing a fair amount of silver and notes. The fee I had understood was 5/-, but I saw Stevenson put a pound note down for the two of us. So much for his vaunted incredulity.

"The fittings of the room were pretty much what I had expected. A heavy purple curtain of some cheap cloth hung all round the room and right across the bay window. It was nine o'clock in the evening, but even in broad daylight I should imagine that it would shut out every vestige of light. It certainly very effectively cut off all ingress of fresh air.

"A long and wide rectangular table which took up most of the room with a black-curtained cabinet about six feet high at one end; an imposing-looking chair in black oak, almost a throne in fact, was visible between the looped-back front curtains of the cabinet, and with some fifteen chairs round the table this completed the entire furnishing of the room.

"The occupants of the room also ran true to type. I can always find interest in the study of my fellow-men," said the doctor, with his quick smile, "and I had an opportunity to examine them now as we were apparently waiting for some late-comers before the séance could begin.

"Eleven of us altogether. Four or five middle-aged women typical of their class, wives or widows of small tradesmen and city clerks, I should judge. Most of them wore black. It is usually bereavement that first brings these women to a séance, more's the pity. Highly emotional, credulous and wallowing in sentiment, they are a steady source of income to the medium.

"As in any group of humans, just a few forced themselves on the attention by virtue of some outstanding characteristic, pleasant or otherwise. A very pretty fair-haired girl in her early twenties, accompanied by her mother; I judged that she was the spoiled child of fairly wealthy middle-class parents.

"Something in her shy awkwardness indicated that she was a home girl. Our city business girls, whatever their failing, do carry an air of easy assurance that this young thing did not possess.

"Obviously, she was her mother's daughter. The same voluptuous rolls of fat which enveloped the elder woman were reproduced in the daughter in the form of decidedly more becoming womanly curves, and the rather hard features of the mother were repeated with genuine beauty and symmetry in the girl. Yes! Speaking diffidently, as becomes an old fogey and a bachelor, I should say she had sex appeal.

"Poor child!"

Dr. Snell paused and gazed abstractedly around the little bar-parlour. I waited without comment. We were alone downstairs by now as "Mine Host," presuming on our long acquaintance, had made his way to bed. Something in the look of painful reflection told of eerie happenings to be related, and the sombre ticking of the grandfather clock created an atmosphere of chilly expectancy.

"Another member of the party who obtruded himself for less pleasant reasons," went on the doctor suddenly, "was a young man who appeared to be called Mr. Rolf. He managed to combine a generous display of upper teeth with a loose and sensuous lower lip. A thoroughly nasty young man, if I am any judge of character.

"He ogled the young girl, Miss Parker, in a thoroughly sickening manner. His attentions were received by her in a nervous, simpery way and

from the fact that Mother appeared to countenance his advances, if not actually to encourage them, I gathered that he was pretty well provided with this world's goods. I know the Mrs. Parker type of woman pretty well and can gauge their mental processes.

"The rest of the party was composed of several sheepish-looking men of middle age. I should imagine I looked pretty sheepish myself. I certainly didn't feel very proud of myself at the moment.

"The entry of Mrs. Power with two elderly spinster women who kowtowed to her as if she were some divinity, was the signal for us to take our seats at the table. I found myself about half-way down the table, with Stevenson on my left and Mrs. Parker and daughter, with the unpleasant young man, Rolf, almost directly opposite.

"Mrs. Power, since her entry into the room, had dropped her genial volubility and adopted a role of solemn stateliness. As she glided impressively to her seat in the chair within the cabinet, an awed hush fell on the assembly. I speculated on the acute knowledge of human psychology that these creatures possess.

"I afterwards found that the name of Power was an assumed one. She was really plain Mrs. Whittaker, but I give her credit for a good deal of perspicacity in the choosing of such a suggestive *nom de guerre*. At all events, the personality of that vulgar little woman certainly held sway in that gathering.

HOCUS-POCUS

"I will not weary you with details of all the hocus-pocus that we were treated to during the first half of the séance. She gave a demonstration of psycho-

metry by the light of a single red lamp which stood on the table before her. You know the practice. The medium takes in her hand some article belonging to one of the sitters, and with this to form a contact she professes to get into touch with friends in the spirit world, who obligingly answer questions in a carefully non-committal manner.

"I was mighty relieved that the proceedings had not opened with a hymn, as I believe is sometimes the practice. Such a sickening piece of sacrilege would, I verily believe, have sent me out of that stuffy unimposing room at once.

"As a piece of fraudulent psychometry it was not even clever. The inevitable 'control'—in this case, I believe, a departed Chinaman—chattered and gabbed unintelligibly, invariably chipping in when the questions became awkward.

"For instance, a spirit friend who turned out to be grandpa Parker was got 'on the line.'

"Mrs. Power did not even trouble to simulate the accents of the dear departed, apparently using her talents in that direction for the materialisation in the second half of the séance.

"In response to a shy enquiry by Miss Parker as to her future husband, Grandpa Parker informed her through Mrs. Power that her husband-to-be was a good dealer nearer to her than she suspected; a reply that elicited a bashful giggle from the girl, and a hoarse guffaw from Mr. Rolf.

"But when Mrs. Parker asked him the whereabouts of a signet-ring which he had kindly bequeathed to her husband, the Chinese 'guide' burst in with some asinine generalities and rapidly introduced still another spirit friend who was anxious to help.

"In spite of Mr. Stevenson's urging, I refused to send up any of my belongings to the head of the table. I was so nauseated with the whole performance that my one desire was to cut it short. Indeed, I gathered that others round

the table were but little interested in this part of the programme, and were anxious to get it over. Apparently, the materialisations were the thing.

"After about half an hour of this dreary stuff Mrs. Power announced that the conditions were 'thickening.' Power from the other world was rapidly generating, and she herself now prepared to go into a trance and allow 'her poor body to form a vehicle whereby friends from the other side could for a space take shape before the mortal eye'.

"And now, amid a subdued and expectant bable of conversation, things began to happen at the head of the table. With a sort of shamefaced pride in their adeptness, two of the middle-aged gentlemen who sat next to her proceeded to take the most extraordinary precautions against fraud. They reminded me of two members of a music-hall audience who have been called on the stage to assist in an escapologist exhibition.

"With a clumsy thoroughness they proceeded to lash Mrs. Power into her chair by her forearms and ankles, using one piece of rope for the whole performance; a piece of tactics that never fails to fool the uninitiated.

"The cabinet was then closed by lacing the curtains together at the front, the two gentlemen resuming their seats, each with one end of the tape used for lacing in their hands. Finally, on receiving the signal from within the cabinet of "I am ready", in a deep sepulchral voice, one of them switched off the table light, leaving the room in total darkness.

"The hum of conversation died to an expectant hush. Stentorian breathing from within the cabinet, which finally died away to inaudibility, indicated that the medium was going 'under control'. An uneasy silence prevailed for perhaps five minutes, broken only by occasional slight shuffling among the sitters. And then we had the first of the manifestations.

"Noiselessly at first, the stuffy over-heated air of the room began to stir in our faces, blowing from the direction of the head of the table and then faintly at first came the sound of flapping wings, as if a large bat was fluttering about above our heads. Sceptical though I was, I must admit that it gave one an eerie feeling. I could almost feel the atmosphere of tension that was being built up around that table.

"Straining my eyes to pierce the velvety blackness, I was eventually able to pick out the faces of the sitters directly across the table from me, showing as dull blobs against the greater gloom. As my eyes became more accustomed to the darkness I was even able to see the outline of the fairly light-coloured dress that Miss Parker was wearing. I may say that my eyesight is exceptionally keen.

"And now, as the flutter of wings died into silence, came the sound of a sigh. Feeble at first, it grew in intensity with repetition and finally developed into a sob. First on my left near the foot of the table, the sobbing wail swept down the length of the room, as though a disembodied form was hovering over the table between us. My critical faculties thoroughly awakened, I speculated on the effect of the heavy hangings against the wall and how it would add to the difficulty of locating the actual source of the sound.

"Suddenly, from the direction of the curtained cabinet came the accents of the Chinese guide, Wung Su. Chattering playfully, it greeted several of the sitters personally. Again the voice swept swiftly to the other end of the room, this time seeming to pass behind me.

"One of the maiden ladies who had been the last to enter the room, a Miss Clarke, was addressed directly and told that Uncle Charlie was trying to come through. Miss Clarke took up the conversation in sprightly manner, revealing in her method of address the typical English middle-class conception

of a Chinaman, as something mid-way between an infant and a half-wit. She said in a ludicrous attempt at pidgin English that she would be delighted to see dear Uncle Charlie again.

WUNG SU



"'Y ou
waitee, the
powers they
gather,
chanted
Wung Su,
and then
commenced

to chatter engagingly to the materialising spirit. Suddenly, a dim phosphorescent light appeared over that end of the table. From my distance of some six feet it appeared to enshroud the features of a jolly-looking elderly man. The face only appeared to be illuminated, the rest of the head lost in darkness, and the writhing luminosity gave a ghastly semblance of animation to the features. Miss Clarke, evidently an old hand at this game, greeted the apparition with gusto.

"'Oh, Uncle Charlie, you do look well, so full in the face and so happy looking.' I gathered that Uncle Charlie had not only put on flesh in the spirit world, but had acquired a gaiety of demeanour which he had lacked in this world. Then followed the usual type of cross-questioning. Miss Clarke gushing and the apparition replying in a typical 'merry uncle' kind of voice.

"Could I detect a slight Cockney accent in that well-simulated male voice, or was I mistaken? Never for a moment did I doubt that the whole thing was a clever piece of trickery, engineered by Mrs. Power, with the possible help of a confederate. Just how it was done I could not be certain, but it was my intention to find out..

"Other voices spoke, first from one corner of the room, now from another; but never once I noticed, did two speak

at the same time. Evidently there was no accomplice.

"And now the voice swept to within a few feet of us. Did it come from behind or above me? I could not be sure. 'Mr. Brown' bellowed a stentorian female voice and I felt Stevenson stir beside me. Then came a burst of laughter. Evidently, Mr. Stevenson's feeble little subterfuge over the names could raise a laugh even in the spirit world.

"Like a flash there appeared in front and about three feet above us the face of a woman wreathed in the phosphorous glow. Stevenson gasped and I sensed that he had leaned forward to identify the face. Identification was difficult, the face was nondescript, but the thing that interested me was the fact that the glowing mask was swinging gently from side to side with a pendulum-like motion. It was evidently hanging from something.

"And now began a sort of guessing game. 'Is that you, Martha?' No reply, but a burst of elfin laughter. 'Clara, oh it's Clara or is it Mrs. Bentham?' Mrs. Bentham it was. She was apparently appearing as proxy for a 'dearly loved one' who could not as yet control the power. Just who the dearly-loved one was, was not very clear, although a series of leading questions from Stevenson finally established her as a long-dead sister. And then, as though someone had knocked off a switch, Mrs. Bentham disappeared.

"Another long interlude of meaningless backchat from Wung Su and then a startled gasp from Mrs. Parker and her daughter across the table. Apparently they had a visitant. It was some moments after conversation had started with the apparition who used a 'light' male voice, before I located it.

"All I could see was a thin line of phosphorescent glow, evidently one edge of the reverse side of a face. The word 'mask' leapt to my mind. I was looking at the reverse side of a mask painted with phosphorescent paint and

suspended from some point directly over the table. The shallowness of the fraud nauseated me.

"I was in two minds whether to leap to my feet and denounce the whole thing. Only the natural aversion of the conservative Englishman to being involved in a row restrained me. I hardly listened to the futile chatter. The vision was now addressing Miss Parker in terms of intimate affection, the girl replying in a half-hysterical manner.

"And then, without warning, I became conscious of a subtle change in the atmosphere. You have heard in the conventional ghost story of the 'smell of evil'. Well, that somewhat describes the sensation that came upon me. And yet it is a moot point whether this sensation was anything to do with ordinary senses. It was rather that my inner consciousness registered the presence of a new personality.

"A thing of beastliness—a foul smell, a foul taste in the mouth, and yet it was none of these things. It seemed to grow in intensity, to pervade the stuffy room. I heard Stevenson commence to breathe heavily. There was a stirring in the darkness behind the Parkers; a little frightened shriek from the girl.

"'Oo, it's touching me,' and then a beastly gurgling laugh which rose above, but simultaneous with the high-pitched voice of the phosphorescent mask.

"I felt things happening around me. A gasp from directly behind me, the glowing mask fluttered to the table and lay face upwards; then a tap on the table by my side as if it had been lightly struck by a stick.

"I strained my eyes to pierce the darkness across the table. I seemed to see the light blouse worn by Miss Parker obscured by something dark. It seemed that a form of darkness towered above her. A shrill scream in ever-rising crescendo broke from Miss Parker, and at the same moment I was conscious of a muffled cry of 'My Gawd' from behind me and the sound of a

body flopping to the floor.

"Noise—an infinite variety of noise arose throughout the whole room. A whine of fear and the crash of a chair as the man Rolf scuttled to the other end of the room, but above all the screams and cries rose the sound of a ghastly mouthing and hoarse laughter from the black power which held the Parker girl in its grasp. Rooted to the spot with nauseating contraction of the diaphragm like a band of iron round me, I was weak and powerless with an all-pervading feeling of loathing and horror.

"A sharp crash as the chair in which the girl was sitting splintered and fell and I was released. I flung myself across the table and clutching in the darkness I came into contact with the girl's outflung arm and held on with all my might. I felt myself drawn full across the table like a baby.

"We were both being drawn toward the wall. The girl had ceased to scream; the ghastly gibbering rose to a bellowing roar, but above the hubbub I could hear someone shouting 'Lights.' I was almost face down on the carpet on the other side of the table now, still clinging with a sick intensity to the girl's arm.

"Suddenly the lights flashed on. I found myself looking up at the girl, who was crouched in a queer attitude hard against the wall, and I could swear that I saw filmy black naked arms slip and melt away from her breast as she collapsed in a heap almost on top of me. Her clothing had been stripped from her down to the waist.

A GHOULISH PRESENCE

"A few moments for my eyes to adjust themselves to the light and my professional instincts took charge. I straightened her out on the carpet and began a rapid examination, unconscious of the chattering, weeping crowd that gathered round. Thank God she was alive, though unconscious. Her

shoulder-blade and right arm were broken, splintered, in fact. The ghoulish Presence had essayed to drag her through the wall!



"Quickly, I looked up, and sent Stevenson to find the telephone and ring for the ambulance and the police. Then I looked around for Mrs. Power. No need to look for her in the cabinet, which was still laced up. Rolf and another of the men had found her in a dead faint on the floor behind the chair in which I had been sitting. She revived before the police arrived, but was to my professional eye still on the verge of collapse and unable to talk.

"When the subdued crowd of sitters had gone and Miss Parker and her hysterical mother had been taken away in the ambulance, I spent half an hour or so with the police inspector examining the room. I said as little as I could to him about the events of the evening, and it did not take long for him to decide from the evidence at hand that the whole thing was a fake.

"The luminous faces were easily explained. A clever arrangement of a fishing-rod—that was what I heard fall on the table, enabled Mrs. Power to suspend the painted mask before the sitters and an arrangement of a sort of pulley made it possible to draw the thing out of a bag at the end of a line and thus make it appear and disappear.

"A small megaphone found on the floor where Mrs. Power had collapsed, explained how the voices had been 'placed' about the room. All this paraphernalia and more with it had been

concealed between double curtains in the side of the cabinet.

"An examination of that cabinet revealed the rope still loosely twisted round the legs and arms of the chair. It is practically impossible to secure a person to a chair with a single piece of rope without leaving a certain amount of it slack, and her exit from the cabinet was through a cunningly-constructed faked seam at the back.

"It was a very subdued Stevenson who accompanied me home that night, and we discussed the events of that evening not at all. Neither then nor since.

"The sequel to the whole affair was rather amusing. Mrs. Parker, her faith in spiritualism entirely shattered, was not above taking advantage of the occasion for monetary gain. Mrs. Power was sued for assault on her daughter.

"I was called as a witness, but I was never asked for my opinion on the matter, even had I felt prepared to give it.

"It was so obviously a case of sheer fraud that Mrs. Power hadn't a leg to stand on. If no one else in that room that night had really known what was happening, she certainly did, and yet her defence was a sort of half-hearted attempt to throw the blame on one of the other sitters.

"If she had ever contemplated telling the truth I have no doubt her counsel told her not to be a fool. It was obvious that they would have liked to throw the blame openly on the obnoxious Mr. Rolf; but lack of direct evidence prevented that.

"And so the plaintiff received £250 damages; which I thought was little enough. I never saw poor little Miss Parker again. She was too ill to appear in court, although I have heard that she has since recovered. Whether she can entirely forget the feel of that loathsome touch on her body is a different matter."

Dr. Snell ceased speaking and applied himself to the remainder of his drink.

Stiff from my tense posture and my tongue dry from open-mouthed attention, I essayed to speak.

"And this monster, this elemental force as I believe you call them, can it be that such beings inhabit the world of the after-life. What a ghastly conception! It would almost revive the old belief in a material Devil. Or do you think that this creature was actually the spirit of some low type of human who has passed on. A criminal or perhaps a maniac?"

"I have a theory," said Dr. Snell thoughtfully. "It is entirely my own and I have not sufficient data to establish it, but my idea is this. The ghoulish monstrosity that materialised that night in the little villa on the Great North Road, was not the spirit of any departed human.

"That idea is repugnant, nor is it wholly logical. Neither was it what you have described as a material devil.

"No, I believe that is what we can loosely describe as a 'thought form'. How can I make myself clear? Unless you have made a study of the phenomena of wraithes of the living, there is nothing to which I can make the faintest comparison."

He paused and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Now look here," he went on suddenly. "Can you conceive for a moment of the mental and emotional conditions prevailing in that dark over-heated room that night. In the first place, the influence of the medium, Mrs. Power. A mentality of low-grade cunning, actuated by sheer avarice. The sitters, in the aggregate of third-rate intellect, present out of vulgar curiosity and all, mark you, making a conscious effort to get into touch with another plane.

"From these conditions I say there was created—evolved is perhaps a better word—a Thought Form of incredible beastliness. The presence of the man Rolf, a creation with lust written all over his face, probably was a contributing factor. Think of this

'Thought Form' growing in power, fed by the conditions of absolute credulity of the sitters, as the séance proceeded. Perhaps it even draws something of its substance from the body of the Power woman. Many of these fraudulent medium have genuine ability which they have learnt to abuse for their more rapid gain.

"Such is my theory of the presence that infested the room that night. It fits in with the facts of this case and with several others of which I have made a study. Incidentally, this experience also indicates the terrible perils that can attend such ignorant and unlicensed tamperings with the supernatural.

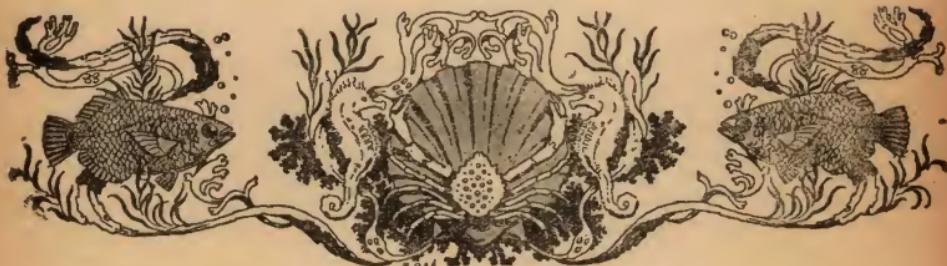
"I would hardly hazard a guess that

similar happenings to this but on a less awesome scale are taking place frequently at those private séances; the medium alone knowing where the fraudulent manifestations end and the real thing begins. Keep away from them, young man. I certainly shall in future."

The doctor rose and stretched himself.

"Well, well, look at the time, 2 a.m.," he said. "Early afoot to-morrow morning, you know. Five hours' sleep may be all right for an old geezer like me, but I prescribe at least seven for virile young people like you."

He turned and made for the dark opening that was the foot of the stairs. I followed him very, very close behind.





Long Grey Fields

The Wanderings of a Mind Deranged

By PAUL RORKE

PERSONALLY I thought he looked a weak and undersized little man. But it was not long before I discovered how wrong I had been.

He was sitting with his back to us and I noticed how thin his neck appeared to be, and the contrast of his white skin and dark hair seemed to suggest weakness.

Suddenly, he swung round in his chair, stared at us with burning eyes, and commenced to speak:

"My God, it had happened!" he jerked. At last—it had happened. I had been expecting it for days, for long agonising days. I had expected it—God knows why. It was all clear in my imagination, and when it happened I had no surprise, but horror, only horror.

"And still, as I sit in this miserable prison, the whole thing is stark and wildly clear.

"Those days of dread, days of great fears piling mountainous above me—and it happened. The thing burst into the world of reality and came thundering down in an avalanche upon me. No longer dread—the horror of reality shattered it, and the horror suffocated my soul, become the only air I could breathe.

"Every night as I walked home from my work I expected it. I quickened my pace as I approached the house. My whole being panicked against it. I was terrified. I wept for joy when I saw my house. But when I settled down for the evening I wondered—perhaps tomorrow.

"Perhaps to-morrow—I could never be free from it. In sleep it was there; in waking it was ever in my mind. Now it was a background to my thoughts, now a terrifying gloom hanging over me, saturating and poisoning my mind. Perhaps to-morrow—who can ever be free from fear? At work, at rest, day and night I expected it, dreaded it, loathed it. I had thought of it but twice, when I knew it must happen.

"It was early in October. I had had a long day's work, and was tired. The twilight was grey as I left the station on my way home. Clouds raced across the sky in melancholy haste. There was a high wind and the falling leaves swirled and danced with difficulty as they slowly saturated in the fitful rain.

"Every step increased my fear. The wind lamented and moaned round the houses, and the shadows of the trees waved hysterically on the footpaths. The horror was dammed up before me. I knew it had happened. I went faster. I hurried. I ran. Through all the streets of the town I ran, ran, ran. Æons and æons seemed to pass, and still I ran. But I knew the way. Hadn't I known the place for years.

"'It must be to-night,' I screamed as I approached the road. I closed my eyes and ran blindly down the road a hundred yards. I stopped. The wind had lulled, and my footsteps echoed a little and faded. I stood, for fully a minute I stood, eyes shut, hearing the wind like breakers in the distance, and trying to reason.

"'Here,' I said, 'is my home. Here have I lived for twelve years.' I was quieter. But I was terrified to open my eyes.

"All is well. Quietly, now quietly. I smoothed my hand across my forehead, cold and wet with the rain, and I stood.

"Suddenly, the hurricane broke about me. The wind screamed, the trees, echoing, the clouds, my brain, everything echoing—'It has happened!'

"Wildly I opened my eyes. God—it had happened!

"Slowly I stretched my hands towards where the small wooden fence of my garden had stood. But my eyes stared, shot wildly in front of me. My hands touched the cold wet leaves of a hedgerow. My eyes, God! I saw!

"The house where I had lived for twelve years was an ordinary modern villa. There were a hundred or more like it in the road. I looked for it, for them—fields, long grey fields, sloping down to the west and away from me. Fields stretching and rolling for miles on either side, long grey fields lying heavy as lead and cold right to the horizon, and a washed grey sky beyond, greyer than the fields and rolling for miles, infinitely.

IT HAD HAPPENED

"It had happened!
"Temple's, the Smithers's houses were on the other side of the road, with the church at the end. I flung myself round—fields, long grey fields sloping down to the east and away from me. Fields stretching and rolling for miles on either side, long grey fields heavy as lead and cold, right to the horizon, and beyond—sky like a black wall.

"I stood for a moment. Had my mind . . . ? But no, that was dangerous. And it was all too clear for that.

"Then I collapsed, and whimpered like a child, lying in the cold road with those long fields stretching away from me, sloping and rolling for miles, infinitely.

"I lifted my head—slowly—perhaps after all—I shrieked when I saw those fields, cold and dead in the twilight. I got up—I ran again.

"I must get away from it. I must get away."

"I thought of Downey, my best friend.



"I'll go to him. He'll help me.

"I ran along that road, straight as a stretched ribbon, for miles I ran, for miles.

"Downey lived at the corner. His house must, must be there. The same grey fields fell away from me as I ran, ran. Then the corner, the house—Downey!

"I fell on my knees against the door, groping, clinging, and thundered at the panels with my two fists. The noise echoed through the house, the whole world echoed, my brain was full of echoes, bursting, thundering, crashing.

"Suddenly the door fell away from my hands. A great flood of light poured out, and my brain seemed to fly far away, chasing the echoes of the hammering.

"'Where's Downey?' I cried, leaping into the hall. 'Downey, I must see Downey.'

"The woman looked at me, standing with her hand on the door. She never spoke. Her lips were parted, and her eyes seemed to stare. But she was silent. I ran up to her, and she cringed against the wall.

"'Who are you?' I stretched forward to question her. Another door opened. A man stood there in his shirt-sleeves.

"'Where's Downey?' I repeated, and the words seemed strange, as though someone else, someone I did not know, had spoken them.

"'Downey, I must see Downey.'

"I pushed by the man and ran into the room. Down . . .

"Like a host of dead bodies they sat round the table, staring, their lips parted, people I did not know, people I had never seen. They had a meal before them, but they were not eating. They just stared at me.

"'For God's sake don't stare at me! Where's Downey?'

"No one answered. Their lips parted a little more, and they stared. I knew Downey, his wife, his family, but these. . . .

"Had my mind become. . . ? But the

thought died in my heart. Impossible—me!

"I leaned against the wall. Of course, I was over-wrought. I was tired after all I had been through. After all—I suddenly thought of those long grey fields. They were real, they were true.

"The people seemed fixed round the table like dead bodies, struck suddenly where they were.

"'Downey!' I shrieked.

"Then I looked down at my feet. How funny! They were sliding away from the wall. I was sinking down. My old black boots, sliding like that! I began to laugh, and my boots went faster.

"Suddenly, all those dead bodies rose up and rushed at me. They were huge and staring, their parted lips had closed to thin pale lines. Their hands were stretched towards me, seizing at me. Those bodies were clamouring for me, for me— One of them struck the lamp as he rushed, and it swung violently. Huge body shadows lurched about the walls, their huge hands grappling, lunging at me.

"Suddenly, there was a loud shriek, long and terrified. The bodies poised before they sprang. Everything became still, frozen, as the shriek tore the air. I listened, the piercing sound was near me, it was upon me—it was me. I could feel the warm saliva trickle down my chin. I could feel the vibrations as I screamed, but the scream was not mine. It was from something within me.

Then those bodies pounced. With one startling rushing movement they pounced. The whole room swirled, tumbling, collapsing, pounding down, down—and I tossed myself unconscious on the floor.

DREAD DREAM

"I smiled to myself when I awoke in the morning. My face was buried in the pillow, the soft pillow, and I woke

slowly. Yes, I smiled, poor fool that I was. All those days of dread—for a dream. The darkness of the night, those fields, the absolute nothingness where my house should have been, all dissolved, gone into the edge of sleeping and waking, into my soft pillow.

"I smiled, turned on my back. And



I smiled as I sat up in bed. I felt the smile freeze on my lips.

"The walls were staring at me like the eyes of those bodies. The walls were staring—my God, whose walls? And the window—whose window? These things were not mine. They did not belong to me, to my house. The window was long and latticed, with blue and white check curtains; mine was tall and narrow, with lace. The walls—yellow—white. . . . There was a birch-tree outside the window with little leaves.

"My mind? Had my mind become. . . . ?

"I sprang from bed and shot at the door. It had all happened before. The idea careered through my brain as I fell on my knees, clinging, groping, thundering on the panels with my two fists. All before, all before. . . .

"Unconsciously, the sickening knowledge of a futile, a stagnant, an unchanging action, the despair of it all grew on me.

"What was the use? It had happened before. Why, even the pervading echo and the thunder of my fists on the panels was no different. I thundered myself deaf, and fell collapsed, asleep, dead, where I was. I awoke calm, but no longer doubting the hideous truth. The thing had inflicted itself on my mind as a grim and stifling shape for ever."

* * * * *

Abruptly, the man finished speaking. I turned to the others. The doctor looked back.

"Extraordinary case," he whispered to me.

I was silent for a moment. I realised it might have happened to me, to anyone.

"Yes," I replied, "his mind has become completely deranged."

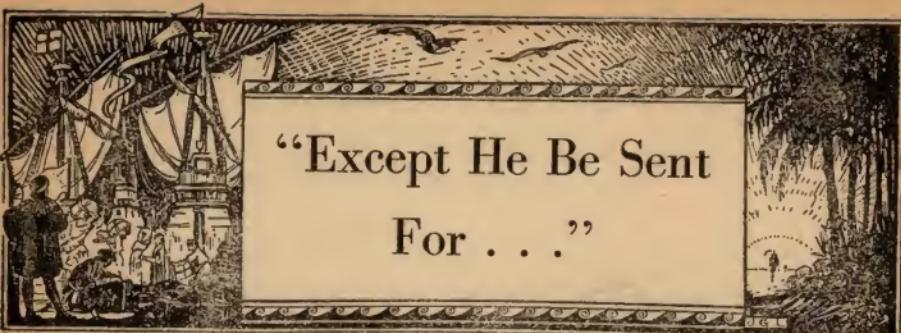
The doctor gave me a quick glance. It was too late. The man had ears like a panther. He stared round wildly and sprang at my throat. I could feel the bones crushing in my neck. He threw me on my knees.

I can see to-day the look in his eyes. The terror, the resentment, and the fury. The bloodshot wildness of him. Saliva was trickling down his chin.

"He's said it," he yelled, "I've fought it, I've fought it. It's tried to break through. I've smashed, I've beaten it out. He's said it. It's broken through. I can never be free from it."

His body was bent over me, and the warders were tearing at his arms. His form grew huge. It ruled. I saw nothing but the foam rolling out of his mouth, and I heard nothing but his wild shriek:

"He's said it, he's said it!" and I sank into unconsciousness.



“Except He Be Sent For . . .”

By A. J. BULL

OURS is not one of the most prolific of families, though tolerably ancient and well-connected in an undistinguished kind of way, and when my great-uncle Ralph, died some few months ago, I was not entirely surprised to be informed by the due legal channels, that I was burdened with a good share of the old gentleman's property, as also with the care of his papers and what are called, I believe, "literary remains."

Accordingly, I made my way down to the solid mansion in Norfolk from which my uncle had rarely emerged, if at all, since the end of the last century, and prepared to fulfil as dutifully as possible whatever might turn out to be the proper things to do on these occasions, relying no little on the help I anticipated receiving from the family lawyer, whom I expected to be already alighted, and flapping in true vulture style, round the melancholy spot.

But, to my surprise, no such person was in evidence; instead, a brief note from his London office explained that my uncle had laid it down with cast-iron firmness that only myself, his nearest male blood-relation, was to have sight of his papers, and that I was to deal with them exactly as I pleased after due perusal.

My only regret now is that I did not burn the whole collection on the spot, and thus save myself a painful disturb-

ance of mind, of which the reader will be able to share the brunt if he perseveres with this unpretentious narrative. Having once opened and read the manuscript, however, I feel there would be little point in condemning to oblivion a tale which can hurt no one living, and maybe a matter of interest, and even be a warning, to those who dabble, as I believe a great many now do, in the pursuits herein indicated.

There is little to tell (began my uncle's narrative) about the early years of my brother Richard and myself, as we spent them playing, quarrelling, and making friends again, in this house, or rather in the gardens round it, for most of our waking hours were spent in healthy activity out of doors. My brother was the more imaginative of the two, and I recall, as an instance of this, him standing at the end of a massive hedge, and remarking seriously, apropos of nothing:

“How dreadful it would be, Ralph, to turn the corner of this hedge and find a devil waiting beside.”

The sun was shining, and there seemed so little occasion for this sally, that I, though fully imbued with the timidity and superstitiousness of the average boy, was able to laugh it to scorn at the time, though I sometimes remembered it with less comfort on less favourable occasions, as when put to sleep by myself in a large and gloomy

attic room for a time. But on the whole our childhood was happy and uneventful, and it was not till we were already young men at the university that any division came between us, who were otherwise noted for a faithful and even devoted pair of brothers.

The country gentlemen of those days—for a gulf has already opened between the habits and culture of fifty years ago and to-day—were perhaps a more eccentric race than their descendants. Neither games nor more serious occupations were as rigidly standardised as seems often now to be the case, and for want of anything more definite laid down for them to do, individuals of means and leisure often developed along their own lines, sliding imperceptibly from a whim into a hobby, from a hobby to a mania, until the careless and carefree young gentleman who entered so blithely upon his inheritance, ended as the bowed, obstinate, and even slightly unbalanced victim of his own favourite study or recreation. Such a life-like portrait as "The Antiquary," was, in fact, not confined to the boundaries of the northern kingdom.

My unfortunate brother, had he lived, was heading unmistakably for this peculiar if harmless category of earth's inhabitants. He was, like all our family, intelligent and even intellectual; in happier circumstances he might have attained distinction among historians, or at any rate among antiquarians, but his mind, however clear and even penetrating at times, lacked the philosophic tranquillity of the true scholar; he was not satisfied to progress slowly, adding grain to grain like the industrious ant, and rest satisfied with contemplating the littlenesses of which the human story is chiefly made up in its painful progress through time and space; he wished to know more, to understand more, than is perhaps granted to mortals.

I was not altogether surprised when I found out, indirectly, that in his third

year at the university he was tending to forsake the dusty, but secure paths of history for more exciting avenues—that he was dabbling in medieval magic, in spiritualism, and whatever promised insight into the occult regions which surround the daylight and materialism of our common lives.

His impatient, even headstrong, nature, and strong will would, I knew, submit to no guidance from a younger brother, fond though we were of each other, and I made no attempt to influence him in any way, save by getting him to join me, whenever possible, in normal sporting or other pursuits.

Nevertheless, we inevitably drifted gradually apart, my friends were no longer his and in his last term, the summer one of 187-, we were meeting perhaps only two or three times a week, at dinner, and afterwards it was seldom that he would join me in my rooms for a smoke and a chat, professing himself to have much work awaiting him elsewhere.

LAST PSYCHIC SESSION



This "work" seemed to take place in the rooms of his particularly crony, one Morrow, of whom as I shall have more to say later, I shall not speak now. As will appear, it was in his rooms that the last night of my poor brother's life was passed.

The session, as it may be called, for one or two others from outside colleges who were interested in studies of the same kind were present, broke up in some disorder, for the gate-porter afterwards remembered these visitors, he told me, taking their leave in the lodge with a kind of subdued, yet defiant air,

and going out into the night with a little air of resolution, as if the college with its lights and strong bars were a citadel, and they a scouting party venturing into what might prove a hostile darkness.

However, it was my brother, not they, who suffered for that night's work. Morrow saw the visitors away, and my brother did not appear, but the porter noticed him crossing the inner quad on his way to his own rooms, walking with a reckless kind of fling, and hugging under his arm a book which he seemed to cherish very tenderly. This was all I could afterwards gather of that night, till I came to look into the crystal, of which more in its own place.

If the reader thinks I have been long over these preliminary details, it may well be, and that for a reason which may incline him to forgive me: for the next thing I have to tell is no pleasant tidings, even had it been possible to believe that nothing but natural causes had been at work; but when a young man in the flush of his strength and spirits is struck down by a power whose origin seems incredible, yet the only possible one, words do not come easily to describe the thing.

In brief, the body of my poor brother was found the next afternoon, lying full length in a part of the college gardens seldom visited in the ordinary course; being out of the way of all the main paths or thoroughfares.

An old gardener named Andrews made the discovery, and at first he was apparently almost overcome; indeed, the fright and even horror he evinced were greater than could be accounted for even by the terrible nature of the facts, in which after all he was not, as we thought at the time, directly concerned; being no connection of the dead man's, and scarcely even knowing him by sight.

As it happened, I was in my rooms when sent for by one of the dons whom old Andrew's alarm brought upon the scene, and was thus among the first to

reach the body. It was clear that Richard had descended a little flight of stone steps from the lane which here passed by the college grounds, and turned the corner sharply to the left by a great yew hedge fully eight feet high, which flanked all one side of this small and as it were sunken garden, before encountering whatever it was that had blasted him.

He lay on his right side, with both arms upflung as if to guard his face from a blow, or was it simply from some sight too terrible to bear? At any rate, his poor precaution had been in vain, for on his countenance was an expression of the most appalling terror possible to imagine in any creature of our species, whatever the crisis or phenomenon he could be called upon to face. To say that his features were contorted would give little idea of the truth—they were writhed, as if in that dreadful moment he had made a last attempt to disguise his very self, his personality, anything rather than admit to the responsibility, and share the fate, of the wretched figure who lay there before us.

The power, whatever it had been, had taken no denial. If my brother had indeed brought this fate upon himself in a moment of headstrong folly and guilt, as I afterwards came to conceive possible, he had conjured up forces beyond his or any human being's ability to control; and I think it was the realisation of this, stamped too late upon his features, which formed the peculiar horror of their expression. Here in that green English garden, he looked indeed like one who had seen for a moment into the Pit of Hell.

It came into my mind, as the body lay there, feet and legs in the deep shadow of the great hedge, and the upper part in the sunshine of the level lawn, that Richard had made a despairing attempt to twist himself free from that shadow, like a swimmer entangled by weeds or something worse, and hurl himself into the safety of the sunshine.

If so, he had failed, but his fate was no doubt already sealed when he set foot on the first of those stone steps leading down into the fatal garden.

THE "OTHER"



It remains only to mention the matter of the book. On the lawn beside my brother's body lay an ancient volume of the lore to which he had devoted his recent attention. It came, apparently, from the library of the college, rich, as beffited a medieval foundation, in such literature, and the musty look of its Latinity would not have encouraged me to explore very deeply, had not the volume opened, like so many well-used ones, at a certain page, and my eye falling at once upon a passage underlined in red ink, took in more than it realised at the moment: this was the purport of the underlined words, brief, yet how pregnant: "But the Other cometh not, unless he be sent for."

Who or what was this Other who responded only to a summons, or to a challenge. My mind misgave me, and at that time I read no more.

But a week later, when Richard had been laid to his last rest, and the most violent waves of the accompanying commotion had had time to die down, I made my way once more to the garden, and found there old Andrews, whom I wished to question a little as to what he knew, or suspected, of the affair.

As I had expected, he at first refused to talk. Perhaps refused is too positive a word. He simply remained inarticulate. It is clear to me now that he had some inkling of the truth of things, and

I can only sympathise with his desire not to be mixed up in the slightest degree with such a business, or rather, not to be further and actively mixed up with it, for involved to some extent he was, by virtue of his position and what he had found out himself in the past.

I was impatient, persistent, and harried him with questions until he shifted more and more uneasily and looked at me, still dumbly, with an almost imploring expression, the look of a man between two fires and not liking either of them. For I had something to go upon that showed him my quest was not entirely a random one.

In the interval since the discovery of the body I had made cautious inquiries, and also investigated the old records in the college library, as a result of which certain ideas, certain suspicions, had gradually formed themselves in my mind, almost without my own consciousness, but pointing dimly towards some monstrous possibility that was as yet scarcely more than a shadow in the background.

It appeared that the garden in which my brother had met his end was one of the oldest parts of the college, that it dated back to pre-Reformation days, and in fact had formed part of a small monastery which had stood on the site, and had later been absorbed into the college in the reign of Henry the Eighth. Now it was the set policy of that period, of course, to ascribe the worst possible character to those foundations which the rapacity, or the reforming zeal, of the authorities, had marked down for destruction, so that I had not been unduly surprised when I began to explore the contemporary records, to find hints at proceedings of a nature to damn the old monastery and its tenants thousand fathoms deep.

Nevertheless, the said hints seemed a little more than usually suggestive, as compared, say, with the records of neighbouring foundations, if, that is, one can rely on distinguishing, even at

some distance of time, between instances where men are working up a bad case into a worse, or in plain terms, are doing a little bit of fanciful lying, and one where they know they have got hold of something pretty putrid, and do not need to invent, are rather concerned in fact with covering up a bit of the too-rank actualities.

At any rate, when I put it to old Andrews that the place was still known to the select few as the Abbot's Garden, and hinted that the dignitary after whom it had received that appellation might be one whom the Church could spare sufficiently well from her bosom or wherever abbots repose, when their terrestrial careers reach an appointed end, he opened his mouth several times and closed it again rather in the manner of a fish in extremis, before murmuring gently:

"Ye know something, sir, and after all ye have a right to know more, if 'twill be any help in easing your mind for the past; but will it, and shall I do right to say anything, though for myself I am not afraid, my time being short here in any case, and me seventy-eight in August, if the good Lord wills."

"I don't want you to say anything that hurts," I replied to this, the first lead I had yet obtained in the whole mysterious business. "But tell me this, if you can and will, how long has the yew hedge been in existence?"

THE YEW HEDGE



Apparently, I could not have asked a question more staggering to the old man than this. He made several times as if to move away and give up the whole matter, but possibly concluding at last that it would be better to satisfy me and get it over, he muttered what I took to be the words:

"Since his time, if you will have it, yes, it must be from his time, everything points that way."

"Now," I said, as gently as possible, for it was plain that a little more and the old man would literally take to flight, "have you ever seen anything; in this part of the gardens I mean?"

This time he did not hesitate, but the words came out almost with a pleased rush:

"Never seen anything, nothing at all, nothing." And then after a pause: "I never work in this part after the sun is past its height."

"Just one more question," I ventured, "do you know of any other name for the garden besides what we have mentioned?"

He did not reply for a second, then flung at me a brief "No," and taking my words as a dismissal, began to hobble away down the path.

But I called after him, quite softly:

"Did you ever hear of it being called The Pit?"

He did not turn round, but hobbled on faster and was soon lost to sight among the walks.

Left alone, I looked round. It had been about eleven when I had sallied forth to find the old man, and must by now be almost high noon. The great yew hedge stood like a wall before me, impassive, dominating; I have no great use for what they call, I believe, the Pathetic Fallacy nowadays, but my imagination was certainly then within an ace of attributing some kind of life, of sentient feeling, to that awesome mass.

There was in it, beside the mere bulk of the thing, a quality of stillness, as if it, or something associated with it, were waiting, and waiting not just passively, but with a will, a purpose, like one of these tropical growths that traps living things and nourishes its strength on their struggles. Absurd, of course, in peaceful England. I turned away with a little shiver in spite of the sun, and made my way slowly back to the more

populous regions of the college.

And now I approach the last phase of this affair, in which as heretofore the realms of common sense seemed inverted or perverted, into what could only be called the incredible, or the insane, yet still as before with a certain mad rationality of its own, and leading step by step, wildly yet inexorably to a conclusion which satisfied the logic of events and brought cause and effect together with the precision of a legal brief.

That same evening there was a knock at my door, and the dark, somewhat Spanish, countenance of my brother's friend Morrow appeared in answer to my invitation. It will readily be guessed that he came to tell me something with a bearing on the recent sad event, and, in fact, his communication was so well calculated to open up an avenue which I had already gropingly approached, that I could not resist the eventual proposal he made, with a view to obtaining more, possibly the final light, on this dark mystery.

The following night, therefore, I found myself, under his guidance, in the house of a woman who belonged apparently to the circle of mystics, or at least dabblers in mysticism, to which my brother had attached himself, as I have hinted, during the last year of his life.

I need not weary the reader with the preliminary details of the ceremonies that night; sufficient to say that at length we three, the medium, Morrow, and myself, found ourselves gazing into the slightly luminous interior of the crystal sphere, in a state of high suspense and with some under-current also of anxiety, but whether for our own safety, or for what we might be called upon to witness in the crystal, it would be difficult to disentangle, so intertwined are human motives at their clearest.

The room was almost entirely in darkness; we had been warned, of course, not to make a sound or even

a slight movement which might interrupt the crystal gazer's powers of concentration. For a time therefore we waited, seeing nothing, and conscious of nothing save the beating of our own hearts. At length with a slight quickening of the pulse I became aware that a scene of some kind was forming in the sphere, remote, tiny, yet unmistakably a scene, with the firmness of reality.

I may as well mention now that from this moment to the frightful upshot, I did not, could not, spare a moment to glance at my companions, yet was aware of them, like myself, absorbed to the uttermost of their faculties in what was passing before their sight.

THE CRYSTAL REVEALS



I realised that we were looking from above at the steps into the sunken garden. Our position as spectators corresponded exactly with that of anyone standing behind the wicket-gate, and I recall to this day the sensation of literal pleasure it afforded me to realise that we were cut off from that place of evil by the gate, and consequently were, I felt, secure.

I mention this point, trivial though it may seem, for the sake of what followed. The ancient poet says somewhere, with what I always considered a

rather nonchalant self-satisfaction, "How sweet it is to stand safe upon the shore and watch the tempest blowing and vessels labouring in the deep." Such was our position at this moment indeed, but not for long.

Suddenly, and with a little shock of alarm all the more startling for our previous sense of security, I perceived, as no doubt did my companions, that we were no longer without, but on the inner side of the wicket, and consequently on the topmost step leading down into the garden, while at the same moment it became apparent that there was an additional person in our company, whose back was towards us and whose feet were already on the second step of the flight.

It did not need my recognition of the broad shoulders, nor of the well-known rather dark clothes he usually wore, to tell me that this was my brother. The inner fibre of the brain which acts more quickly in these cases than any process of external recognition and verification, had already flashed that knowledge into my consciousness; in fact, without any message from the senses, I already knew that I should see him there, moving as in life for the last time, though unable to communicate with us, or we with him.

Yet it may seem strange to you now, reading this, that I was not moved to cry out, or in some way endeavour to restrain him from descending. It seems strange, indeed now, even to me, yet at the time my will, my senses even, seemed rapt away into a state of immobility, of dream-like tenseness, along with a dream-like incapacity for action, from which nothing but the most violent of shocks could arouse me.

Or to put it more simply, I was so absorbed in the drama about to be enacted before my eyes, that I could find no thought, no energy, for purposes of my own volition.

At any rate, I remained still as death, watching the fatal sphere, and the only thought of which I can, at this long distance of time, remember being con-

scious of, came into my mind from below, from the unconscious depths: the phrase seemed to form itself on my lips, yet silently:

"He is going down into the Pit."

At the same instant the form of my brother began to descend the steps. In this simple statement lies a horror which no one but myself, who saw him go, and already had an inkling of that to which he was going, can understand.

In the very silence of the whole thing lay an additional horror. We saw his feet touching each stone slab in turn, but without any sound coming back to us from that nightmare world into which he was descending. And not only sound, but the other values of the sensual world seemed to be transmuted into something different, less known, and in that degree ever so intangibly sinister.

The sun still shone glassily, but all the fresh and brilliant light of the garden at noonday seemed to be dimming into a vagueness, almost a fog, as when in a nightmare the vision becomes clouded in an instant and the hands seek in vain to brush away from the eyes a mist that constantly overwhelms and menaces them.

So with the green hedges and lawns that had hitherto formed the scarcely realised background to the scene. They seemed to be melting, dissolving, and at the same time darkening into obscurity and even receding from our sight into remote distances.

The perspectives were changing in fantastic ways, and the solid sinking into a chaos of smoky forms and protuberances on which one would not care to trust a foothold.

And into all this my brother continued to descend with the resolution of a diver bound to investigate a lower world, whose perils he realises, but is bound to ignore.

And now came a fresh turn of the wheel, leading directly to the final catastrophe in this strange affair: we, watchers, began to follow the moving

figure down into what had been the sunlit garden, but what I have now been let into calling a kind of lower world, where the familiar and healthy laws of our own seemed to be abrogated.

MOMENT OF TERROR

Not that we moved, I suppose, in reality, but the scene in the crystal began to approach unmistakably nearer to us, as in a mirror brought closer, and so the steps on which we seemed to be stationed moved beneath us, or at any rate in some way we were at their foot.

At this point I for one experienced such a feeling of anguished helplessness and dread of the unknown as I have never again undergone, though faint recreations of it in my sleep, often so disturbed as it has been, still bring me a memory of that moment of terror.

For I now knew, without any doubt whatever, that within a few instants we were to see the actual cause and even the manner of my poor brother's death, and I also knew that that cause would be no human agency, nor anything on which the eyes of sane men could rest and remain so.

And it was at this moment, when the form of Richard was already turning the sharp corner from the foot of the steps to the great hedge of yew, when he had therefore only one or at most two seconds of life yet remaining to him in this world, that there suddenly flashed into my mind the boyish saying of his which I have quoted in the beginning of this narrative: how, standing by one of the thick old hedges in our garden at home in the old Norfolk house where I now write these last words, he had said, with the sun shining on his serious young face and everything very still around us:

"How dreadful it would be, Ralph, to turn the corner of this hedge and find a Devil waiting beside it . . ."

And as the words came unbidden

into my mind, we, the watchers, seemed to turn the corner by the hedge also, whither Richard had preceded us only a moment before, and our faces seemed to be in the full sunlight, but round our feet and knees were swirling clouds of smoke, and our brains reeled in that last instant, so that nothing was clear any more in the crystal, but it seemed to me, and no doubt to the others, that beyond the form of my brother, still upright but tottering in its death fall, was another form, gigantic as the yew hedge from which it seemed to have sprung, overtopping a human being by a head, save that head or features it had none, only a snout or muzzle like a beast, but black where a beast is brown and friendly.

We saw no more, for the medium, at whom I had not glanced for several minutes, so quick was all this in passing that I have taken so long to tell, threw herself raving from her chair to the floor, the crystal rolled out of her grasp, bearing with it for ever the curling smoke-wreaths, the hedge still bathed at its height in the ghastly mockery of the sunbeams, and the unspeakable remainder of that obscene show. Somehow, Morrow managed to find the candles, and our occupation for the next hour lay in reviving the medium from her collapse.

* * * * *

I placed my uncle's manuscript on the table before me and looked round the old library; twilight was falling and all was still. Decades must have passed over this house without any disturbance of the material fittings, while the minds of its owners ground on in the ceaseless human seesaw of emotions. I rose and went out into the more inhabited quarters of the building.

Mrs. Acworth came bustling out of her little den and exclaimed:

"Deary, me, sir, ye look quite decomposed, and no wonder indeed, weary work it is reading of other people's troubles, even if they be our own flesh

and blood, as if we hadn't enough of our own, which we have, surely, as nobody knows better than me; but there, let me get you a nice cup of tea, the best thing," and so on, with the welcome result however of a nice cup as specified before very long.

After which I felt rather better and went out for a breath of air before it grew dark. The very ancient gardener was pottering about near the French windows; on the impulse of the moment I called him up and said:

"How long have you been working for your late master, Holt?"

"Eh, bless you, why, all my life to be sure, that is ever since I was but a lad."

"Then tell me something," I continued, "why are there no hedges to speak of in the gardens here, and especially not a scrap of yew anywhere, by what I can see?"

The reply satisfied my expectations and seemed to round off the matter a little, for the old man scratched his nose thoughtfully and made answer, calmly and without haste:

"Lord, sir, no wonder you should ask that. The fact is, the master was a little bit faddy that way; wouldn't have a scrap of hedge, as you say, big enough to hide a hare in. Had 'em all rooted out soon as he became master, when he were a young man almost straight from the college. . . ."





The Flute

The Hamadryad and the Death of Ram Das

By ROGER GRAHAM

ALL day Savage and I had been forcing our way through dense jungle, following a small herd of wild elephants in the tropical forest of the Western Ghats of India.

The monsoon had just broken and rain came down in solid sheets: trees and foliage took on eerie shapes in the dusk and mist, and the only sounds to be heard were the drip, drip of the rain and the cracking of branches.

Wet to the skin, we plodded on, with

not even the stimulus of success to cheer us up, for we had failed to get a shot at the herd, though we had got close to it and driven it finally into dense bamboo, where we had eventually lost touch. In spite of the rain, the weather was hot and sticky: our clothes were torn by bamboo spikes and leeches had dropped down our necks and covered our boots.

It was almost dark when, tired, wet and incredibly dirty, we came in sight of the little forest bungalow of

Tavargali. It was approached by a long drive, thickly overgrown with tall trees and lentana bushes, and stood in a small clearing in the forest, which was knee-deep in rank tropical vegetation. The ground sloped sharply down in front of the bungalow, and perhaps on fine days there would be a magnificent view of the forest, but it was now almost shrouded in mist and had evidently not been lived in for some time.

The walls were covered all round with straw matting to protect them from the rains and this gave the place an even more gloomy appearance. But, in spite of its desolate atmosphere, this little habitation represented shelter and food, and we were badly in need of both.

We had arranged that my native car-driver would bring my car with our bearers, kit and food to meet us at the bungalow, and I had given strict injunctions that they must arrive early so that baths and a meal should greet us on arrival.

Sure enough, a car was standing by the porch, but, to our disgust, we saw that it was not ours.

"Some blighter has forestalled us," said Savage; "probably accompanied by his wife."

"In that case," I replied gloomily, "we shall have to doss down on the veranda."

However, as we came up to the bungalow, we were greeted by a stout, middle-aged Indian of the Babu type: he wore a white dhoti and a sports coat; on his closely shaved head was a small round cap; his feet were thrust into patent-leather pumps, and suspenders encircled his bare legs, blatantly holding up a pair of black cotton socks. Saluting us politely, he said all in one breath:

"I am Ram Das, rate collector, sir, and have been sent here on duty. I do not wish to interfere with you and will sleep on the veranda. I see that your servants have not arrived, and the chowkidar is away in the village. But I

will tell the driver of my car to boil some water and I hope, sir, that you will accept a cup of tea."

This little speech took the wind out of our sails and we assured him that, although the bungalow had been reserved for us, we had no objection to his staying and we then walked into the living-room.

When we had quaffed two cups of strong tea, well laced with whisky from my flask, we felt more resigned to await our belated car.

The rain, too, had stopped, although the sticky heat was almost overpowering; as we sat smoking on the veranda we listened to the thrumming of the cicadas in the surrounding trees, hardly noticing at first the distant playing of a flute. As the sound grew steadily louder we wondered idly who could be playing the pipe in the jungle after dark. The nearest village was two miles away and there were no huts nearer except the little hovel attached to the bungalow itself.

As the piping continued, we heard a chair being pushed back and then Ram Das, whom we had left writing in an official book, got up and waddled past us down the steps. I noticed that he seemed strangely agitated and said to him:

"What is the matter, Ram Das?"

"Do you hear anything, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Some coolie or wood-cutter is playing a flute in the jungle."

Ram Das looked wildly at his car and I half expected him to start up the engine and drive away. However, he changed his mind and shouted for the chowkidar, the caretaker of the bungalow.

Getting no reply, he called for his driver and sent him round to fetch the man; after a few minutes the driver returned and told his master that the chowkidar was still away and his wife said that he had gone to the village and would probably get drunk and not

return before the morning.

"I will report the man," said Ram Das vindictively, "and will see that he is dismissed."

At this moment our car arrived: I called to the driver:

"Come here, Gundu, you have been a long time on the road."

"Master," he said, "there was no road. The rain has washed it away in many places and we had to push the car through water to get here. Only the main road to Bandsi town is good."

The other servants then came up, and it was obvious, from their bedraggled appearance, that there was at least some truth in what he said, so we told them to take our kit inside and get themselves some food.

COMA, THEN DEATH



Soon the welcome sound of water being poured into our tin tubs brought us in for a bath and change of clothes, a painful process when we discovered the ingenuity of the leeches who had wriggled through the eyelets of our boots, thence over the tops of our socks to fasten themselves on to our long-suffering legs.

Eventually, sore but clean, we settled down to a late supper to which we did ample justice, too hungry to be put off by the myriad insects and moths of all shapes and sizes who buzzed round the solitary lamp, flopping on to the table and on to our plates. Not even the strong smell of Flit, which the servant kept busily pumping, could impair our appetites.

We took our coffee on to the veranda, so that we might study the weather and estimate our chances either of making another raid on the elephants, or of returning home while the going was comparatively good.

Ram Das had put away his documents and was lying curled up in a

corner of the veranda; he was completely covered from head to foot in striped blankets and loud snores indicated that our conversation was not likely to disturb him.

Though the rain had stopped, heavy clouds were moving across the sky and the moon made but momentary appearances which lightened for a few seconds the surrounding gloom. It was in one of these fleeting glimmers of moonlight that I saw an aged crone moving under the trees; she appeared to be carrying a flat earthenware bowl. I had hardly time to wonder what she could be doing late at night when darkness descended again and I saw her no more.

After a final nightcap we retired to our camp-beds and it was not long before we were fast asleep. I was dreaming that I was gliding round a ballroom to the music of a very sentimental dance tune when I woke up; drowsily I found myself listening to the plaintive sound, though the tune now had a mournful Eastern lilt.

Suddenly I realised that someone else was awake, too; from the veranda came sighs and groans. Looking through the mosquito curtains I saw Ram Das, clad in a shirt, staring into the darkness beyond. Then with a despairing cry he ran down the steps of the veranda. I got up, more in annoyance at being disturbed than in alarm, and was about to follow him on to the veranda when a piercing shriek rent the air and I saw him staggering back to the bungalow.

As he reached the steps he collapsed and lay writhing on the ground. Snatching up a torch I went up to him and shook him by the shoulder, but he was apparently in a fit, foaming at the mouth and moaning.

I called out to Savage to bring some whisky which he did and we tried to pour it down his throat.

Nothing that we could do, however, had any effect, and the wretched man gradually fell into a coma which merged into death itself. All the

servants had by now collected on the veranda, so Savage and I told them to get lamps and sticks and we made a thorough search of the clearing and out-houses. We found no sign of life and heard no sound except the roaring of a tiger.

Savage, however, stumbled against an earthenware vessel in the long grass close to where I had seen Ram Das turn; he asked the servants if any of them had put it there. As none of them admitted to having seen it before, he sent his servant to find out from the chowkidar's wife if she knew anything about it.

COBRA-BITE

She admitted to having put a bowl of milk there, stating that her cat had strayed into the jungle and she wished to entice it back.

"Cat?" said Savage tersely. "I wonder"; and he walked over to where Ram Das lay. Kneeling down beside him, he made a thorough examination of the body by the light of his torch.

"Look here," he said to me, directing the torch on to the dead man's leg. Just above the knee the flesh was swollen and discoloured but, in spite of this, I could see two angry-looking punctures.

"Snake-bite," he said laconically, "and a cobra at that, a small snake could never have struck him so high up the leg. What are we to do about it?"

"It is now just after midnight," I said, glancing at my wrist-watch, "and it will be light in about five hours. There is no doctor nearer than Bandsi—not that a doctor would be of much use except to confirm what we have seen—but we must get the police out here without delay."

"You are right," he said; "there's something fishy about this business: we had better send the car over as soon as it is light." Accordingly we told the driver to get some sleep and to take a letter to the police at Bandsi as soon as it was light.

While we were having breakfast next morning the car returned with a doctor and police sergeant, both Indian; the latter brought a telegram for me, recalling me to my own station.

While our servants stowed our luggage into the car, Savage and I dictated statements to the policeman and told him where he could find us if we were required again.

While the sergeant was making a tour of the premises with us, the chowkidar arrived and salaamed deeply. The sergeant interrogated him in the vernacular regarding his absence during the previous evening.

"Do you know," he said sternly, "that it is your duty to be present when sahibs come to the bungalow?"

The old man salaamed again.

"Will the sahibs forgive me," he said; "but I went to the village to get medicine for my wife, and there I took food which made me ill."

The sergeant snorted.

"Drink, you mean," he said; "and you were too drunk to come home."

The chowkidar, to my surprise, admitted this and begged us not to report him.

I turned to the sergeant:

"What sort of a man is he?" I asked. The sergeant admitted that the man had a good reputation for honesty and sobriety and added that he was surprised that he was absent from the bungalow.

"Do you know," I said to the chowkidar, "that a man has died during the night?"

"My wife has just told me," he replied, not seeming much moved by the fact.

"I shall not report you," I said, "though I shall give you no pay. But the collector sahib will know you were away when Ram Das died."

The sergeant then dismissed the man and went to write a report on the case which I promised to deliver at the collector's office on our way to Bandsi. It so happened that the collector was

touring his district when we arrived at his office and I took the report in to the head clerk telling him at the same time what had happened.

"RAM DAS BAD MAN"



After we had started off again, Ali Bux, my servant, who was sitting at the back of the car, leant forward:

"Sahib," he said, "I have been speaking with a man at the collector sahib's office and he told me that Ram Das was very bad man."

"Bazaar gossip," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I suppose that he made them pay too many taxes."

"No, sahib," he replied; "he married a girl from Tavargali and because she liked to play the pipe, he beat her."

Savage, who was driving the car, whispered to me:

"I wonder what's coming next! All the same, I think that I would beat my wife if she played that sort of music all day long."

"Sahib," went on my servant, "men say that his wife died of the beatings."

"I suppose that Ram Das died of remorse," I said, feeling that I was now getting near to the answer to the conundrum of how and why he died.

"No, sahib," said Ali Bux earnestly; "he was killed."

"Who killed him?" I asked.

"Hamadryad killed him," he replied. Now the hamadryad is the King Cobra, the most feared snake in India, as it will attack man without provocation. Most snakes try to avoid us.

"Come now, Ali Bux," I said, "if hamadryad did kill him, it was not murder, but an accident."

"Nay, sahib," he said; "snake was lured from the jungle by the pipes and milk was placed so that it would come up to the bungalow."

I remembered the old crone.

"You don't tell me that that old woman went into the jungle and brought the snake out to kill Ram Das," I said.

"No," replied Ali Bux, "but she put milk for the snake and her husband was in the jungle playing the flute."

"But," I objected, "the chowkidar was drunk in the village all night and will bring witnesses to prove it."

Ali Bux laughed.

"The sahib knows that a man's friends will bear false witness if he asks them to do so."

"But why should the chowkidar want to kill Ram Das?"

"Because, sahib," said my servant deliberately, as if indeed this clinched the matter, "Ram Das's wife was the daughter of the chowkidar. That, sahib, is the truth."

Truth indeed lies at the bottom of a well, and in the East there are many knives to cut the ropes that would drag her up into the light of day.



The Woman With The Scythe

The Nightmare that came True

By ROBERT E. NICHOLSON

THAT morning, when Mr. Mansfield came down to breakfast, he looked as though he had had a bad night. His eyes were heavy and it seemed that he had slept little. His wife remarked on it at once.

"You look tired, dear. 'Didn't you sleep well?'"

Her husband yawned.

"I had a nightmare," he told her. He sat down at the breakfast-table and began to prod absently at his grapefruit with a spoon. "Silly sort of dream," he said, smiling wearily, but without bad temper. "Quite absurd! But it certainly spoiled my rest." He took a mouthful of the bitter-sweet fruit.

"What was it? What happened?"

He laughed, thinking of it.

"Ridiculous business. An old woman was chasing me."

"An old woman?"

"Yes. And believe me it wasn't with any amorous intentions. I was running up a straight narrow stairway. It seemed to be endless and there was

nothing on either side—just an endless stairway in emptiness, with me running up it as hard as I could go and this old woman after me."

"Why was she after you?"

"I don't know." He pushed away the grapefruit-dish and began to butter a piece of toast. He laughed again. "She was certainly angry about something. She had a horrible ugly face, like a malevolent charwoman, and she was carrying a scythe."

"A what?"

"A scythe. One of those things gardeners use for mowing long grass. She was tearing up the stairs behind me and sweeping the long blade in my direction."

"Was she far behind?"

"About ten yards or so, and gaining on me slightly as we ran. Give me some tea, please."

"I wonder what made you have a dream like that," his wife said, pouring out the tea.

"Something I ate, I suppose. Anyway it was bad while it lasted. It seems

funny enough now, but during the nightmare I was terrified."

"It must have some sort of meaning. I mean——"

"It means," he interrupted her smilingly, "that I shouldn't eat cheese so near bedtime. That's all."

But Mrs. Mansfield was not so easily satisfied. So vivid a dream must have some esoteric significance. And after her husband had gone off to business she consulted her dream book. There was, however, no explanation given for a dream about being chased by a malevolent old woman with a scythe; so Mrs. Mansfield got on with her house-work and forgot all about it.

Three days went peacefully past. Then, on the fourth morning, when Mr. Mansfield came down to breakfast, again he looked as though he had had a bad night. Once more his eyes were heavy, and it seemed that he had slept little.

"You look tired, dear," said his wife. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"No," snapped Mr. Mansfield, "I didn't sleep well. That old hag was after me again."

"What old hag?" she said vaguely.

"That damned old witch who was after me the other night with the scythe."

"Oh," said Mrs. Mansfield, remembering, "her! Again! That's funny, having the same dream twice. It must mean something. Was it exactly the same?"

"Exactly. We took up just where we left off last time racing up the stairs, with her gaining on me a little. She got about another yard nearer to me last night."

His wife giggled.

"She'll get you yet if this goes on."

He looked at her with a tired eye.

"Pass the marmalade, please," he said coldly.

She passed the marmalade.

That night Mr. Mansfield went to bed early and slept dreamlessly. He rose in fine form, alert and good-tem-

pered. He was nice to his wife, pleasant to the staff at the office. In the evening he went to the theatre and enjoyed the play immensely. Sleepy and good-humoured, he retired to bed.

THE HORRIBLE HAG



And again, refreshed it seemed by her night off, the hag was after him. Skinny, bent, hideously ugly, she tore tirelessly up the stone stairs, lashing out at him viciously with her scythe. She gained another yard. When he woke up, sweating and trembling with horror, she was only seven yards behind.

"This can't go on," he told his wife. He was now thoroughly frightened. His horror of the hag was no longer confined to the limits of nightmare, but had spread over into the sensible day. "She gets nearer every time. I'm afraid."

"You'd better see a doctor," she advised him.

"Yet it sounds so silly. Chased by an old woman in a dream. He'd laugh at me. If anyone else told it to me I'd laugh myself."

"But it's not a joke now. It's making you ill. You must see a doctor."

"Well . . . we'll see what happens. If I have the dream again to-night I'll definitely go to the doctor to-morrow."

He had the dream again that night.

The doctor was very smooth and sympathetic about it.

"Slight nervous disorder," he said. "Possibly due to overwork. Anyway, nothing at all to worry about. I suggest that you take a holiday as soon as you can. In the meantime, have this prescription made up and take it three times daily before meals: you'll find it

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a very good tonic. This other prescription is a sleeping-draught. Take a tea-spoonful before retiring, and I don't think you'll be bothered by old women chasing you with scythes." He laughed. "I wonder——" he said, then broke off. "Well, good morning, Mr. Mansfield," Good morning," he said, and what he wondered was never known. "Come in and see me in a day or two and let me know how you are getting on."

Mr. Mansfield took a tea-spoonful of the sleeping-draught before retiring. It made him sleep very soundly; so very soundly, in fact, that the hag had got to within three yards of him before he managed to burst panting into wakefulness. He didn't dare go to sleep again. He got up and walked about the house, smoking cigarette after cigarette, thinking frantically:

"She's going to get me! She's going to get me!"

It was mad, quite senseless! The hag was not a recognisable person, was not anyone he had ever met in wakeful life, pursuing him with her scythe? Why should she be thus relentlessly

He did not go to the office that day, but stayed at home and sent for the doctor. He asked the doctor why this old woman should chase him with a scythe. The doctor smiled, dismissing the question.

"You must be calm, my dear fellow. You're attaching altogether too much significance to the fact that this nightmare repeats itself. Go for a holiday, play a couple of rounds of golf a day; and within a week you won't be dreaming about anything. Certainly not about this old hag of yours."

"But what if it does happen again? What if she catches up on me?"

The doctor sighed indulgently.

"It can't happen. Nothing can possibly happen to you in a nightmare. The horror can rise to the highest bearable point, then inevitably you must waken. She catches up on you, she swings back her scythe, and—you wake up. That's all. Believe me, apart from the fact that

you are slightly run down, you have nothing whatever to worry about."

But despite these reassurances Mansfield worried, and after another night in which the dream was repeated and the hag got to within two yards of him, he was nearly demented.

"Within two yards!" he told his wife. His face was pale and drawn and his eyes were staring. "Two yards! Do you realise what that means? Next time I fall asleep she gets me! I'll run—I'll run up those endless stairs—but she'll run faster—faster and faster—catching up on me. And then——"

"It can't happen, John!" his wife said. "It can't! You'll wake up. The doctor said you would."

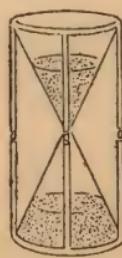
"The doctor! What does he know about it! I tell you, she'll get me. If I fall asleep she'll get me."

"But why? What for? What does it all mean?"

"I don't know," he said hopelessly. "She hates me. She wants to kill me. I don't know why."

"The scythe," she said. "Why . . . ?"

THE END



That night he would not go to bed. He sat up and his wife sat with him. They played draughts for a little while; but his nerves were bad, and soon he stopped. Then for a little while they talked; but that too was difficult, all topics seeming so trivial compared with the horror which menaced him; and conversation languished. Then he tried to read; but the words grew blurred and meaningless before his eyes. He looked into the fire, and from her seat across the hearthrug his wife watched his sombre face.

Time went past, and her eyes grew heavy, and at last her head fell forward and she slept. Her husband looked at

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her—the bent fair head, the grave and lovely sleeping face.

"She does not dream," he thought; and he thought how good it would be to sleep like that, untroubled, without horror. And as he watched her, his own eyes grew heavy and he felt sleep coming over him. He blinked and shook his head and stood up.

"I must not sleep!" he thought in terror. "I must not sleep!"

He went to the window and turned his haggard gaze upon the quiet night. A few far-scattered stars were in the sky. A street-lamp cast its pale light upon the yellow blossom of the laburnum-tree in his little garden. A man went past.

Mansfield leaned his forehead against the cool window-pane and stood there for a while; and again sleep crept stealthily upon him. He lifted his leaden eyelids and stood straight up, unutterably tired; and he thought with the sudden calm of complete despair, the quietness of one who realises and accepts his inevitable doom:

"This is the end."

He went over to the chair where his wife still slept and kissed her on the brow.

"Good-bye," he said quietly.

Then he sat down and composed himself for that sleep which he could no longer put off. He sought no further for explanations, tried no more to escape. Soon sleep came, and with its coming all quietness was gone.

For at once, as though she had been lurking just beyond the border of wake-

fulness, she was after him; and at once, as though he could not bring the calm acceptance of doom with him into sleep, he was racing up the stairs, hearing the swift feet of his pursuer and the swish of her approaching blade. On each side was the sheer fall of darkness. On and on and on he ran, and behind him, drawing ever nearer, was the hag with the scythe.

The stairs were not endless! He saw that suddenly and was shocked, as though a possibility of escape had been cut off. He had thought they went on for ever, climbing into infinity. But now he saw that there were only a hundred more: then nothing. Nothing beyond. Nothing on either side.

(He stirred a little in his sleep and made a faint noise. His wife moved, blinked, and sat up yawning.)

He was running on. There were seventy-five steps ahead. Fifty. Twenty-five. The swinging blade almost touched the back of his neck. Ten steps. Five. He leapt to the last and swung around in terror to face her. She was right behind him, her horrible hag's face full of triumph. The blade swung back for the blow that would make a swift ending of this protracted chase.

"John! John!"

Far far away he heard his wife's voice calling to him. Desperately he strove towards it. But it was too far and there was no time.

"John! John!"

Remote and clear, but very very faint, he heard that loved and wakeful voice as the scythe swung forward. . . .

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Printed at The Windmill Press and Published by The World's Work (1913) Ltd., at The Windmill Press, Kingswood, Surrey.—Sole Agents for Australasia: Gordon & Gotch Ltd.—Sole Agents for South Africa: Central News Agency Ltd. whose London Agents are Gordon & Gotch Ltd.
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